

Rise of Four

by Sapphire-Raindrop

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Summary: The wizarding world is at peace, but a great conflict stirs beneath the surface. A prank gone wrong brings four Hogwarts students together, and each of them holds a key to preventing the rising war. But in order to do so they must work together. Can a fierce Gryffindor, an innocent Hufflepuff, a sarcastic Ravenclaw and a mischievous Slytherin hope to overcome their differences?

1. The Sorting Hat

Hello everyone!

I know, I KNOW, I have "Skyline" and "Earth:Bring it Down" to complete, but I just couldn't resist writing this, too!

I'm a HUGE fan of The Big Four - Jack, Merida, Rapunzel and Hiccup, in case you don't know - and I've been dying to write a story with all of them for a while.

**A very important note: **I'm only gonna say this once, so listen up: THIS IS AN ALTERNATE HARRY POTTER UNIVERSE. That means that while there are characters you know (ex: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, etc) things are NOT the same as in the books. Voldemort never rose to power, Harry Potter was never the Boy Who Lived. This is just an alternate universe where some HP characters exist and some you'll never hear from.

This is not a Harry Potter story. I'm focusing on the Big Four, this is THEIR story. So if you're gonna rant about something, make it about THEM, not if I got Dumbledore's character exactly right or if I miscounted the number of paintings in the Gryffindor common room.

*The Sorting Hat Song is from the 1st Harry Potter book, so no, I did not write it and I take no credit for it. =)

Oh, another important thing...Dumbledore isn't evil. Not in the SLIGHTEST. So when the plot/main conflict starts rolling and Dumbledore is his usual weird self, know in advance that Dumbledore is in NO WAY involved. He's a good guy, he's awesome, and the reason I'm saying this is because in a lot of HP fics I read, they make Dumbledore out to be this manipulative power-hungry wizard, which I think is just a shame because Dumbledore is such a cool guy.

Okay, rant over.

I hope you guys enjoy, and if you like it and/or want to see more soon...

**PLEASE REVIEW! **

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><p>**Rise of Four**
a _Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons_ fanfic, Hogwarts AU
by Sapphire-Raindrop

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><p>Prologue: The Sorting Hat<p>

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><p>If asked to describe the Sorting Hat in a single sentence, Albus Dumbledore would use the word "illuminating", and nothing else. Technically it was not a sentence, but the old wizard had found that the most intriguing aspects of magic simply couldn't be described. He was a master of nearly every form of magic, he had read countless volumes dedicated to explaining and embellishing magic, and yet in the face of the Sorting Hat he was without words.<p>

The Start-of-Term Feast would soon be upon the castle, but for a few precious minutes Albus simply examined the hat, and just before he had to leave to join the rest of the staff, he would do what he did every year. He would put on the hat, and hear what it had to say.

Albus stared down at its dusty form, so dull against the gleaming surface of his desk. Fawkes trilled from his perch, and the wizard looked up at the phoenix, reaching up to lightly trace the feathers atop his reddish gold head.

"All in good time, my dear. All in good time," he murmured, and Fawkes crooned, nipping his fingers so gently that Albus barely felt it. The silver-haired wizard stole a glance at the delicate pocket-watch hanging from Fawkes' perch and estimated that he had at least five more minutes before he was expected in the Great Hall.

Five minutes was plenty of time.

Albus reached out with graceful fingers, and plucked the hat from its spot. It lay limp in his hands, as it always did, and he chuckled before slowly pulling the rim down over his eyes.

The outside world was muted, unnatural darkness reigned, and even though the bottom of the hat was open around his face no light entered the hat. It was a harmless enchantment to ensure that the wearer was less prone to distraction, though it must be quite unnerving to unsuspecting first-years.

Albus sat quietly, and not five seconds had passed before the Hat's nasally tone filled his ears.

_ "Right on schedule, Dumbledore. Will you ever tire of trying to sort me out?" _

The Hat chuckled at its own choice of words, and Dumbledore smiled pensively, choosing not to reply. The Hat seemed to sigh, and its tone was much less mocking when it finally spoke again.

_ "Perhaps I should rephrase my question: will you ever stop trying to sort yourself out?" _

_ "The human mind can always benefit from introspection," _Albus replied, and the Hat groaned.

_ "True, but there is also a time to set aside the grading quill. I can see all that you hide from the world, Dumbledore, but there is nothing I can tell you that you don't already know. You are not in risk of walking that path again, isn't that enough?" _

_ "The Feast will be starting soon; am I safe in assuming that you are ready for the newest batch of students?" _Albus asked, ignoring the Hat's question and asking the same question he asked every year. Part of him knew that he should heed the Hat's advice, but how could he ever be truly sure that he wouldn't make the same mistakes?

Albus had almost destroyed the wizarding world by allowing Gellert Grindewald to become as powerful as he had, he had almost aided in the destruction of the Muggle world because he was too blinded by love to see the truth. Luckily he came to his senses in time, but ever since then he had been on guard against himself.

After Gellart was defeated, an era of tranquility had settled over the wizarding world, a time of peace and plenty. But as long as he could remember his past, Albus would have no peace. Perhaps that was his curse, an added punishment for all of his wrongdoings.

_ "I am, Dumbledore," _the Hat replied. And so Albus, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, removed the hat from his head. He replaced it with a bright purple hat of his own, patterned with stars and crescent moons. Slipping on his equally purple robes, the man strode from the room, Sorting Hat held reverently in his grasp along with his wand.

Half an hour later, Dumbledore found himself in his usual seat at the staff table, chatting merrily with Pomona Sprout. The Great Hall was looking magnificent as usual, the ceiling lit up with a clear night sky that twinkled with stars. Candles floated above each of the House tables, reflecting against the porcelain plates set before each seat. The students talked amongst themselves while they waited for the incoming first-years to arrive, their voices a balm to Albus' somber mood.

They were a reminder. A beautiful, wonderful reminder of the _good_ Albus was capable of. Whenever the Headmaster gazed out at the hundreds of witches and wizards, he felt the weight in him ease slightly. They were the closest to children that he would ever have, and he would die for each and every one of them because theyâ€|. _they _were the future. For all of Albus' fame and renown, the students that sat before him now would be the ones who shaped the wizarding world.

Albus had done his part to try and control the wizarding world, and that had resulted in the loss of everything he held dear. Sweet, innocent Ariana, his mother, his brother Aberforth, his beloved Gellertâ€|they were all cruel marks on his spirit that would never fade or heal. All he could do was try to make up for his mistakes; to give the future generations the tools they needed to succeed, and proper guidance so that none would follow in their Headmaster's footsteps.

Albus heard the large oaken doors of the Great Hall creak as they opened, and the entire congregation fell silent. Apparently, the sight of frightened first-years was much more interesting than idle conversation. Pomona gave Albus a knowing wink, and settled into her seat, her expression warm as she beheld the young ones following Minerva McGonagall across the hall. Albus studied the first-years, placing his fingers together in an arch.

One of the children immediately caught his eye, the reason being his hair. It was messy and spiky, but that wasn't the reason whispers followed him. The boy's hair was pure white, almost silver in the candlelight.

The boy was one of the few students who weren't nervously looking around. Instead, the child seemed almost bored, his vivid blue eyes scanning the staff table lazily. Those bright, bitter eyes passed over Albus, and the Headmaster leaned forward so his lips touched his fingers. Ah, he remembered who the boy was, even though pained him to do so. Every year, the Headmaster was given a full background report of every incoming first-year, and Albus had gone over this boy's report in great detail.

His name was Jackson Overland.

From the look of the boy, no one would ever guess the tragedy that had befallen him. Albus would wager to say that none of his fellow students were aware of the incident, though whether that was a blessing or a curse remained to be seen.

Jackson had been but four years of age when his family home caught on fire. His parents and younger sister were Muggles, and so Jackson's magical abilities had been difficult to discern up until that point. Usually, muggleborns showed magical ability from the time they walked, but Jackson was an exception. Perhaps that was the reason the Muggleborn Recognition Squad had written him off as a Muggle despite his faint magical signature.

According to the Muggle authorities, Jackson and his family were asleep when the fire started. Unfortunately, the central beam of the two-story house fell first, preventing Jackson from reaching his sister and parents. The fire raged, and by the time the fire

department arrived, most of the house was in shambles. The only survivor was a small boy, shaking and trembling, his brown hair bleached a snowy white and his hazel eyes changed to blue.

Jackson had used magic instinctively, and the stress and trauma of his tapping into that magic somehow altered his hair and eye color. Healers had examined the boy, and they couldn't find any negative side effects that resulted from the physical change. So the boy was taken to his nearest Muggle relatives, who were made aware of Jackson's magic as well as how to properly introduce him to the magical world.

From what Albus had read, his older cousin Tatiana and her husband Greg had been nothing but kind and supportive. They raised Jackson as their own, and were surprisingly accepting of the presence of magic and the like. However, reports showed that Jackson grew up to be a rebellious and lonely child, using bravado and trickery as a buffer.

Albus' heart ached for Jackson, and he prayed that the boy would find friends at Hogwarts. Perhaps he should invite the boy for teaâ€|no, that would most likely send the boy running for cover. Albus sighed, and reluctantly resigned himself to the fact that he would have to wait for Jackson to come to him. That is, if the boy ever came to him at all.

The Headmaster pulled his attention away from Jackson, because Minerva was prompting him to speak. Albus stood quietly, smiling for a moment at the student body before speaking.

"Good evening all! Before we begin, I would like to make a few announcements. To all first-years: the Forbidden Forest is strictly off-limits unless accompanied by a professor. Also, our dear caretaker, Mr. Filchâ€"" Albus gestured to where Filch stood hunched over his cane, Mrs. Norris curled up around his knobby ankles. "â€"has asked me to remind all of you that Dung-bombs are hereby banned from the castle grounds. There are many other banned items, the entirety of which is listed outside of Mr. Filch's office. There are three hundred and twenty-five items on the list, and it would be wise to memorize those as soon as possible. I suggest doing so in alphabetical order, it is much easier to keep things organized in that fashion."

A ripple of laughter swept through the hall, and Albus stood for a few seconds more before seating himself with a flourish. Minerva's lips twitched, and she turned to the group of first-years.

"Now, on to the Sorting."

Albus looked to the Hat, which was twitching in preparation to sing. The seam along the lower half of the cap split, causing a few first-years to gasp in surprise. Some of the upperclassmen snickered, but a severe look from Minerva quickly put an end to that.

The Hat's mouth opened wide, and it sang:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can top them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a steady mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

Albus applauded along with the rest, pleasantly surprised as always by the jaunty nature of the Hat's songs. Every year the song was different, though no less entertaining than the one sung the year before. The first-years stared at the hat, some of them whispering amongst themselves but the majority steeling themselves for what was to come.

Minerva waited for the applause to subside, and then cleared her throat, bespectacled eyes flashing.

"I will call each of you by name, and you will sit on this stool and place the Sorting Hat on your head. The Hat will then declare which House you belong to. Are there any questions before we begin?"

The first-years shook their heads, and Albus' chest swelled at the eager smiles appearing. It was so uplifting to see such youthful faces, such pure expressions of hope and wonder. It made the older wizard wish he could go back and relive his own Sorting.

Minerva unrolled the scroll a bit, and gave the entire hall once last sweeping glance before turning her attention to the list of first-years. The Sorting began without a hitch, and Albus smiled and clapped every time a student was sorted into their houses.

"Merida DunBroch!" Minerva called out, having just finished with the surnames beginning with C.

A girl stepped out of the crowd and marched toward the stool. Even if her hair had not been a large, fiery red mane of curls, her swaggering walk and her thick Scottish brogue as she thanked Minerva would have identified her just as easily. DunBroch was a very prominent and influential pureblood family, and Merida was the first-born daughter of Lord Fergus himself.

Merida gracelessly seated herself, her nose scrunched up in impatience as she waited for Minerva to place the Hat on her head. The moment her face disappeared under the rim, her hands relaxed and her foot ceased tapping against the side of the stool.

Barely ten seconds passed before the Sorting Hat proclaimed her to be a Gryffindor. Well, that certainly wasn't a surprise. Her father, Lord DunBroch " Albus had known him as Fergus DunBroch, a boisterous lad with flaming red hair " had also been in Gryffindor, as had every DunBroch before him. Merida's mother, Elinor Gretchen, had been a Ravenclaw, if Albus' memory served him correctly.

Merida hopped off the stool and practically ran to the cheering Gryffindor table. The cheering quieted, and the Sorting went on. Minerva reached the letter H, and peered down at the list.

"Henry Haddock!"

Another powerful pureblood family, Albus mused. The Haddocks had been around since the age where Vikings ruled, and as such still retained much of their Viking heritage. It was the first time in Albus' memory that a Haddock had attended Hogwarts, and in response to hearing that name he carefully scanned the first-years.

Only to be surprised, because Henry Haddock was a small, awkward child with bright green eyes and shaggy auburn hair. Nothing like the

Viking-child Albus had been expecting, and that made the old wizard smile.

What an interesting development, he thought to himself, and watched the Sorting Hat engulf Henry's entire head. The Haddocks were a proud, often blunt family, leaning toward violence rather than diplomacy. And yet this boy didn't appear to be capable of any sort of violence, if his thin arms and nervous expression were anything to go by.

"_RAVENCLAW_!" the Hat bellowed, and the Ravenclaw table applauded loudly for their newest member. Henry looked relieved to be out of the spotlight, and hastened to sit down, smiling nervously at the other Ravenclaw first-years.

The Headmaster nodded thoughtfully, turning his attention to the Sorting once more. Very interesting indeed, for a Haddock to find his place in Ravenclaw. Albus made a note to keep an eye on young Henry, for he wished to know more about the boy who so unlike the Haddocks Albus had known in his lifetime.

Slowly but surely, the size of the first-year huddle decreased until only a small group of students remained. Jackson was one of these students; he was staring up at the ceiling, not even attempting to pay attention to the Sorting.

"Rapunzel Lockwood!"

The girl's first name was unusual enough to make her stand out, and Albus watched carefully as a shy-looking girl hurried to the stool. Her most distinguishing feature was her beautiful golden-blonde hair. It was arranged in a large, intricate braid and yet it was still long enough to reach the small of her back. Several purple and yellow flower clips adorned the top and bottom of the braid.

As Rapunzel approached the stool she met Albus' eye. The sweet smile she gave him struck him to his core, because it was almost identical to Ariana's smile. Albus smiled back, effortlessly hiding the sadness that weighed down on his heart.

"_HUFFLEPUFF_!" the Hat declared after mere seconds of deliberation.

Rapunzel beamed, and her heavy braid swung behind her as she skipped to her table. She was smiling and greeting her housemates before she even sat down, her voice lost in the sounds of clapping and cheering. Albus watched her interact with her peers for a moment more, and then forced himself to look away. The benign smile was still on his face, hiding his true thoughts from any who might be watching him.

Minerva unrolled the last bit of the large scroll, and continued reading off the names. Albus watched Jackson carefully, and when his name was called Albus leaned forward, his fingers folding together.

Jackson stepped up the stool, his face spreading in a smirk as he sat down, a smirk bereft of humor and seeming more resigned than anything. The Hat fell over his eyes, and Jack's fingers tightened around the edge of the stool, his knuckles turning white.

The Hat was silent for several minutes, and Jack's elbows were shaking from the force of his grip. Albus exchanged a glance with Minerva, and her eyes revealed that she was thinking the same thing that he was. To the knowing eye, it was obvious that Jackson and the Hat were at odds with each other.

"_SLYTHERIN_!" was the Sorting Hat's verdict, and Albus saw Jackson's shoulders tighten slightly. He stood stiffly from the stool and walked over to the Slytherin table, accepting the handshakes and excited cheers of his House with a forced grin that was so practiced that it was almost genuine.

Almost.

Albus watched Jackson sit down, and let out a soft sigh that was made inaudible by the applause. He had hoped that the boy would be placed in Gryffindor, but that showed how little he knew concerning such things. Albus was one wizard, and the Sorting Hat had been around for over a thousand years; to question the Hat would be comparable to questioning the Founders themselves.

Finally, the Sorting came to an end, and Albus stood, staring out at the students with a smile on his face.

Albus was not an inattentive Headmaster — he cared deeply for all of his students — but he would be lying if he denied the fact that out of all the first-years, four students in particular had caught his attention. As the old wizard scanned the House tables left to right, the faces of Jackson Overland, Rapunzel Lockwood, Merida DunBroch and Henry Haddock stood out among all the rest.

"Instead of prolonging your hunger, I think it would be best to save the final announcements until the Feast has ended. So I will end this by saying two simple words: lemon drop."

And with that, the Headmaster seated himself, flicking his wand and alerting the House Elves working below in the kitchens. Albus could feel a great wave of magic, and suddenly the platters and dishes were piled high with food. Chicken and turkey and pork all steamed from their platters, and along the tables fruits and vegetables were piled high in bronze bowls. The goblets filled themselves with pumpkin juice and water, and in Albus' cup was a delightful mixture of lemonade.

"To future generations," Albus toasted quietly amongst the staff, and each of the professors nodded in return, raising their glasses as one. The students were unaware of their toast, already digging into the food with gusto.

Albus smiled, and drank. The lemonade was perfectly made, sharp and sour with a slight hint of sugar. The Headmaster breathed in a deep gulp of air, content to simply bask in the sounds of so many wizards and witches under one roof and united by the search for knowledge.

After a long summer of emptiness and silence, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was alive once more.

Guys, get out the record books. This chapter is **8, 581 WORDS LONG.**

...like, let's all stop and marvel at that. Almost 9,000 words in the span of one afternoon/evening.

WHAT?

Hahaha okay, now that we've established my craziness, let's talk about this chapter!

Remember, _5 YEARS HAVE PASSED_ since the Prologue. The Big Four are all in their 6th Year at Hogwarts!

I hope you all enjoy my take on each of their characters, I really worked hard to give them their own personalities!

*if you see parallels...don't worry, I caught them. And decided to leave them in, because almost all of them were completely coincidental. =D

Oh, and I'll warn you now: Rapunzel is a DIFFICULT character to write. I mean, Jesus, I knew she'd be tough but DAMN, writing someone as cheerful and happy as her is EXHAUSTING. So if this first dive into her POV is a bit shaky, just give me some time...

Enjoy, and if you want to see more/have any questions or comments...

**PLEASE REVIEW! **

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><p>Chapter 1: Heading Out</p>

* * *

><p>Henry Haddock III  to be fair, only his grandmother called him Henry, everyone else knew him as Hiccup  was having the most wonderful dream. He was soaring high on his broomstick, weaving in and out of other Quidditch players with ease. He could somehow see himself, and he was muscular and fierce, the Viking everyone wanted him to be. If he looked down at the stands, he could see Astrid Hofferson cheering, her blue eyes glowing and her smile only for him.</p>

Reality came crashing down in the form of his kneazle companion and best friend, Toothless.

Hiccup awoke to a large tongue lapping at his nose, and his face scrunched up in disgust at the fishy stench that accompanied the tongue. The sixteen-year-old shot out of bed, gagging and rubbing frantically at his face with his shirt. A quick look at his digital alarm clock told him that it was 8:30 AM. Hiccup glared over his shoulder at the smug-looking kneazle.

It was Hiccup's mother that had given Toothless to Hiccup, when he was nine years old. The island was home to wild kneazles, most of which stayed out of Berk and any other towns. Kneazles were magical

felines that were much larger and more intelligent than domesticated house cats. They were almost dominantly reddish orange-brown, with mottled patterns on their fur and bright gold eyes.

Valhallarama was walking home one night when she found a tiny kneazle cub that couldn't have been more than a week old. She took one look at the creature and knew what had happened. The cub she found was black as night, with poison-green eyes. The kneazle's mother had abandoned the cub because of its abnormal coloring, seeing the anomaly as a threat to herself and her other cubs.

It took a great deal of cajoling, but Valhallarama was able to convince her husband Stoick that the kneazle would make a perfect companion for their first and only son. Now, at full size, the kneazle was around the size of a German Shepard.

"Was that really necessary?" Hiccup asked, and Toothless grinned, showing off his sharp white teeth. The kneazle's pitch-black fur glinted as he jumped over to the window and used his teeth to yank up the blinds. White-hot sunshine nearly blinded Hiccup, who fell back onto his bed with a yell.

"Gah, okay, I take it back, the licking was completely fine! I love the smell of raw fish in the morning!" Hiccup groaned, rolling over and kicking half-heartedly at Toothless. The kneazle chirped in contentment, slinking over and nuzzling Hiccup's side. The affectionate gesture never failed to destroy Hiccup's defenses, and the young wizard rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, yeahâ€œ!" he mumbled, but still leaned down to rub behind Toothless' ears, smiling fondly at the loud purr that filled the air. Hiccup indulged the kneazle for a moment more, and then moved to get ready. His trunk was already packed, and he silently thanked his mother for making him finish packing last night. Now all he had to do was get dressed and head down to breakfast. Much less to worry about.

Hiccup walked across the cool hardwood floor to his desk, grabbing the clothes draped over the back of the chair. His room was modest, with only the essentials and a few Quidditch posters as well as some of his charcoal sketches of various invention ideas.

Most people at school assumed that he lived in a large manor with gold railings and plush furniture, but the honest truth was that the Haddock family didn't like to follow the trends of most pureblood families. They followed the customs of their Viking ancestors; living simply but still comfortably. The wizard town of Berk was an old Viking trading post, and so most of the residents lived similarly to the Haddocks.

Hiccup pulled on his Hogwarts robes, yawning loudly as he adjusted his blue and bronze tie. He glanced over at the full-length mirror that leaned against his dresser, and his heart sank. Gone was the muscular Viking of his dreams. Instead, Hiccup stared at an awkward, gangly teenager with freckles and green eyes. Playing on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team had given him some muscle, but not the kind of muscle that would ever impress Astrid or any other girl on the island.

Toothless crooned at him, flicking his tail dismissively at the

mirror, and the teen glanced over at his best friend, smiling sadly.

"You're not a girl or a human being, but thanks anyway."

Hiccup wasn't sure when he started understanding the kneazle. He could only guess it was because he and Toothless had been attached at the hip ever since Valhallarama had given him to Hiccup, saying that the kneazle was his responsibility to raise and train. The name Toothless came from the fact that Hiccup quickly discovered that the baby kneazle didn't have any teeth, and as such would have to be fed by bottle.

Toothless nuzzled him again, and then bounded out the door and down the narrow spiral of stairs that led to the rest of the house. Hiccup shook his head, and snatched his wand off of his bedside table. Tucking it behind his ear for safekeeping, he grabbed his trunk and lugged it behind him, careful to not bang his head against the low ceiling as he traversed the stairs.

Valhallarama was standing with her back to Hiccup, leaning over the stove upon which bacon and eggs were cooking. Her dark blonde hair was coiled into a simple bun atop her head, her strong shoulders and arms moving to keep things from getting burned. Toothless wasn't in sight, and so Hiccup assumed that he was outside terrorizing the chickens.

Hiccup's younger sister Freya sat at the table, her eyes shining with excitement. Her golden blonde hair gleamed like hot metal in the sunlight, and Hiccup sighed at the sight of her blood-red robes.

The eleven-year-old was heading off to Dumstrang that morning, along with the rest of the village children. Well, almost all of the children. Hiccup had been the first islander to attend Hogwarts, and would most likely be the last.

Freya beamed at Hiccup when he entered, and her happy smile made Hiccup's mood brighten despite his bitterness.

"Hiccup, Hiccup, look at my robes! Dad and I bought them yesterday, aren't they cool?" the little girl gushed, standing up to spin in a circle, giving her older brother a better look. Their mother chuckled from her position by the stove, glancing back to give her son a smile. Hiccup smiled back, and leaned down to examine Freya's robes carefully.

"Hmm, they'd be almost perfect if you hadn't spilled jam right there," Hiccup mused, reaching down to point at an imaginary splotch on the girl's stomach. Horrified, Freya looked down, and Hiccup used that opportunity to reach up and flick the girl upside her nose.

"I guess I was imagining itâ€¦" Hiccup shrugged, and grinned when Freya stomped her foot, cheeks flaming.

"Just you wait until I come home for Christmas! I'll know magic, and I'll get you back!"

"Too bad you can't use magic outside of school, Frey. You've got six more years till you can do that," Hiccup reminded her, reaching over

to fill his plate with eggs and a few pieces of toast. Freya sputtered, and Valhallarama took the food off of the stove, turning to raise her eyebrows at her son, who shrugged.

"Leave her alone, Hiccup. While she can't use magic, I certainly can, and I have half a mind to teach you a lesson. Freya, sit down and finish your eggs. The boat ride to Dumstrang is very long, and you won't eat properly until the Opening Feast tonight."

At the mention of Dumstrang, Freya's irritation disappeared, and she eagerly returned to her seat. Hiccup snorted, and Freya deftly kicked his ankle. He yelped, and Freya giggled at his expression. Rubbing his foot, Hiccup glared at his sister, who responded by sticking her tongue out.

Watching carefully for his mother, Hiccup flicked a piece of toast at Freya. Without a moment of hesitation, she snatched it out of the air and ate it. The food war continued for a while longer, more out of habit than to actually antagonize. A comfortable silence soon fell over the kitchen, and for the first time in a while Hiccup actually wanted to linger at breakfast.

But then, as if sensing Hiccup's happiness, life decided to send in the one person who could ruin it all.

"Where's my baby girl?" Stoick Haddock bellowed, and Freya laughed, shoving her last piece of bacon in her mouth and running to meet her father. Stoick reached over to kiss his wife, who joined him in admiring their daughter's Dumstrang robes. Hiccup's shoulders slumped, because in the span of ten seconds, he had ceased to exist.

"The other kids are just about ready, Freya. Are you ready? Your trunk's all packed?"

"Duh!" Freya said, rolling her eyes. Stoick beamed at his daughter, reaching down to rub her head affectionately. The sight made Hiccup's shoulders deflate even more.

"I don't know why I asked! Now give me a few minutes, and we'll head over."

With that, and without a single word to Hiccup, Stoick moved into the living room. Hiccup pushed his plate away, his appetite having vanished almost as quickly as his good mood. Valhallarama's hands on his shoulders surprised him, and Hiccup looked up to see his mother giving him a comforting smile.

"He _is _proud of you, Hiccup. He justâ€|"

"Has trouble showing it? Yeah, I know. I think I'm going to head out to school early, Mom. Maybe hang out with Hagrid for a bit before the Feast."

"Honeyâ€|"

"Mom, it's fine. It's not that big of a deal."

Hiccup got to his feet, moving away from his mother's hands and putting his dish in the sink. Stoick came back into the room noisily,

and Hiccup looked back, because maybe Stoick would have something to say to him. But instead, he got a quick clap on the back and a nod, and Stoick's attention was on Freya again.

Hiccup got his trunk and left out the side entrance, to where the broom shed was. He set his trunk down in the grass, and let out a great sigh, leaning his head against the solid oak of the shed wall. It was warm against his skin, and he breathed in deep.

"You're at least going to see Freya off, aren't you? I know that she'll want you there," his mother murmured, and Hiccup laughed without humor.

"She'll be fine; Dad and the others will be there."

Valhallarama's hand rested lightly between Hiccup's shoulder blades, and the teen turned to face his mother. He was taller than her, but she was built like the other Viking women on the island; muscular, sturdy, and intimidating. Her eyes were a deep, vivid green. The distinctive eye color was the only feature Hiccup had inherited from his mother. The rest — the auburn hair, the freckles, the crooked teeth — had all come from his father.

"No one can replace you, Hiccup. You're her older brother; she's always looked up to you."

"Well, that'll change real quick. A few months at Dumstrang, and she'll be just like the rest of them. Face it, Mom. Here, I'm a nobody," Hiccup's voice cracked, and he cursed the hurt present in his voice. He wasn't sure why he was getting so emotional all of a sudden, but he was, and he hated it.

He had known that it would hurt, seeing Stoick fawn and coddle Freya on her first day of school, but imagining it and experiencing it were two very different things.

Hiccup rubbed his face with both hands, coughing roughly to dislodge the lump in his throat. His mother waited for a few moments before speaking.

"Honey, I love you. And even though he can seem a bit distant at times, your father loves you very, very much. It's just that your father, well, he's a Viking. He's very traditional in that sense, and you're well, you're not traditional. It's why I enrolled you in Hogwarts; I knew that you didn't belong in Dumstrang. Just give it time—everything will work out, I promise."

With a final pat, Valhallarama turned and walked down the path to the main road. Hiccup ran a hand through his hair, and looked down at Toothless, who had approached so silently that Hiccup hadn't noticed. The kneazle was staring up at him with knowing eyes, and Hiccup sighed, reaching down to rub his friend's head. Toothless nudged him gently in the direction of the lake where the Dumstrang students would soon be departing, and the teen sighed.

"Better give the rest one last chance to make fun of me before we all head out, huh?" Hiccup asked his friend, who snorted at his pessimism.

A ten-minute walk was all it took to reach the Berk Lake, and as

always Hiccup's heart ached at the sight of the proud ship docked there. The flag waved in the wind, blazing with the red dragon sigil of Dumstrang. The plank was already extended, and if Hiccup got on his tiptoes he could see the large mass of students ready to board. His heart skipped at the sight of Astrid, her long blonde hair blowing around her face. Gods help him, she got prettier every year. It really was too bad that she wanted absolutely nothing to do with him.

Hiccup was grateful that they hadn't noticed him yet. He could just hang back and observe the goodbyes. It would really take the edge off; he wouldn't have to stand by and watch Stoick hug Freya tight and ask her to write if she needed anything.

Stoick hadn't asked Hiccup to write, not once.

Hiccup saw his mother and father standing near Freya, who was looking around nervously. The other children were friendly with her, mock-punching her shoulder and urging her to join their little circles. But for some reason, Freya kept brushing them off, her eyes scanning the crowds of families.

Then, she saw Hiccup, and relief diffused across her face. She was running toward him, past the other kids, past the families, across the grass that separated Hiccup from the rest. She slid to a stop in front of him, her boots slick with mud.

"Thought you were gonna be too chicken to show up," Freya declared, but there was no bite to her taunt. She was pale, and Hiccup frowned. Where had all of her excitement gone? Hadn't she been more than eager to leave?

"Frey, are you okay?" Hiccup asked, and Freya nodded, staring down at her shoes. They were new, made of dragon-skin and a gift from Stoick. Seeing them caked in mud made Hiccup oddly proud. Under all the Dumstrang attire, Freya was still his sister, the girl who liked running around and exploring the forests with Hiccup on cool summer days.

Toothless licked Freya's hand, and the girl sniffed, almost too quietly for Hiccup to hear. But he did hear it, and he crouched down so that he and his sister were eye to eye. She glanced up, and her eyes were shining with tears.

"I don't want to go, Hiccup."

Well, _that_ certainly wasn't what Hiccup was expecting to hear. The teen stared at his sister in shock for a moment, and she only hesitated for a second before speaking again.

"It's not _fair_ that you have to go to Hogwarts and the rest of us go to Dumstrang. I mean, I like the rest of them fine, but none of them like to go exploring with me. None of them can tell me about the wild animals on the island, none of them will invent ways to get out of doing chores, none of them!" Freya trailed off, and before Hiccup could begin to think of an answer, Freya looked up at him.

"I want to go with _you_, Hiccup," Freya pleaded, and Hiccup felt as if he had just run a great distance. He cleared his throat, and put a hand on Toothless for support. The kneazle purred, and the vibrations

were soothing against Hiccup's fingers.

Hiccup stared into the brown eyes of his sister. "I want to go with you, too, Frey. More than you know. Butâ€|"

Hiccup looked up at the crowd of Berk kids, laughing and playing by the lake. His mother's words came back to him, and for the very first time, he didn't feel jealous. Confidence swelled inside of him, and he smiled, knowing what he needed to say. They were the words he wished he could have heard six years ago, when he was the one heading off to wizarding school for the first time.

"You belong at Dumstrang, Frey. Sure, it'll be hard at times; heck, you'll probably want to tear your hair out more than once. The schoolwork will be tough, there will be bullies and difficult teachers, and there will be moments where you just want to lay down and give up," he assured her. Hiccup paused, seeing the dejected look start to appear on his sister's face. He smiled, and leaned down to meet her eyes.

"But you know, it's all worth it. You're going to a place where you get to learn magic, where you'll duel and you'll brew mysterious potions. You'll make loads of good friends, because you're smart and fearless, the kind of person people want to be friends with. You'reâ€|you're going to be just fine, Frey. You're a Haddock, and Haddocksâ€|" Hiccup swallowed hard. "â€|Haddocks are Vikings."

"But you're not a Viking," Freya reminded him, and Hiccup chuckled at the simple truth in her words.

"Nah, I'm too muscular and manly for their tastes. They wouldn't know what to do with all this," Hiccup gestured to himself, puffing himself up and dramatically flexing his biceps â€" or lack thereof.

Freya giggled, and Hiccup lowered his arms, glad to see his sister smiling again.

What he didn't anticipate was Freya lunging forward to hug him. She did it without giving him any sort of warning, and Hiccup stiffened in surprise. But it only took him a second to respond accordingly. He held her close, and felt Toothless curl his body around the two of them.

Hiccup never realized how much he was going to miss his sister until that moment by the lake, when she wasted valuable time with her peers and parents just to say goodbye to him, of all people.

It made it hurt all the more when Freya finally did board the ship with the rest of the students. Hiccup waved, but he doubted that she saw him. The ship gave one loud blare before beginning to sink below the surface of the lake.

Valhallarama left Stoick's side and strode up the path. She gave Hiccup a knowing look, coming up behind him to rest her hand on his shoulder. Both of them looked out toward the lake, watching the ship sink.

"Just like the rest of them? You're one of the smartest people I know, Hiccup, but there are times when you're just plain silly. You

say that Freya will treat you like the other children do, hm? From where I see it, there's no way she could ever be like them," his mother murmured.

"Why?" Hiccup asked, confused.

"Because none of the other children have you as an older brother, that's why. You don't conform, so why should Freya feel the need to conform?"

Hiccup smiled, and Toothless gave a sharp chirp. Valhallarama rubbed Toothless' ears, and Hiccup nodded at his friend.

"Toothless is right; I should get going, Mom. I really do want to check in with Hagrid before the Feast. Before we left for summer break he told me that one of the hippogriffs was due to give birth in the fall, and I'm hoping that I can be there to help out."

Valhallarama looked disappointed, but didn't argue. Instead, she walked with him back to the house. Hiccup didn't particularly feel like having an awkward goodbye with his father, and so he wasn't too disappointed when Stoick didn't follow them.

With the help of his mother, Hiccup retrieved the wood and leather contraption he had made with the help of Gobber, the village carpenter and handyman. The platform basket would strap across the back of his Nimbus 2001, secured to Hiccup through a simple harness. This allowed Toothless to ride with Hiccup on his broomstick.

While Hiccup and Toothless got strapped in, Valhallarama helped by shrinking all of Hiccup's luggage so that it could fit easily in the boy's pocket. She also gave Hiccup a large lunch, to tide him over until the Feast.

"Don't forget to write your sister," Valhallarama said, patting Hiccup's hair into place. The teen rolled his eyes, knowing that the wind would muss it up no matter how much she tried to tidy it. But he knew better than to tell her that.

"See you at Christmas, Mom."

"Have a good trip, honey. Be safe! Remember that story about Uncle Fili?"

"Bye, Mom," Hiccup said, laughing and urging his broom to start ascending. The flight to Hogwarts was around four hours. Since Hiccup lived in Scotland, he had never taken the Hogwarts Express; that was for students who lived in England and Wales. The students that lived in Ireland and Scotland and chose not to fly usually took a portkey to Hogsmeade Village, and then met up with the rest of the student body to travel up to the castle.

"He was just flying, minding his own business, when one of those Muggle airplanes just came out of nowhereâ€"

"The reason Uncle Fili almost got killed by an airplane is because he was drunk. He was staring down at his own feet because he thought if he looked hard enough, he'd find the end of the rainbow. Trust me Mom, you've got nothing to worry about," he called down to

her.

Valhallarama smiled warmly. "I know I don't. Have fun, and be sure to bring some friends home for Christmas!"

"When hell freezes over, maybeâ€|" Hiccup muttered under his breath, smiling and waving to fool his mother for the time being. Then, Hiccup hooked his feet more securely in the metal footholds, and looked down at his compass, clipped securely to the front of his broom. He shifted so he was facing east, toward the mainland, and leaned over his broom.

Next stop, Hogwarts.

* * *

><p>"Jackson, are you awake? We need to leave soon if we're going to get to the station on time!" Tatiana called down the hall, the sounds of her husband cooking breakfast loud and obnoxious.</p>

Jackson Overland hated it when people used his full name. His aunt and uncle seemed to forget that constantly, not that it surprised him. The people couldn't seem to take a hint that he didn't like interacting with them more than he had to.

Jack sighed, opening his eyes and looking over at his alarm clock. He had been awake for at least an hour now, and so he wasn't surprised to see 8:30 AM printed there. The white-haired boy stared at the clock for a moment longer before getting out of bed, pulling on his white-collared shirt and slacks quickly and without much thought. Jack considered his green and silver tie, and then scoffed, stuffing the tie into his pocket instead. He was crap at tying ties, anyway.

Absentmindedly, Jack began tossing loose items around the room into his trunk, including his Hogwarts robes. Oops, he had almost forgotten his Transfiguration textbook, better put that in thereâ€|

A few minutes later, he managed to pack all of his stuff into the trunk. It only took Jack sitting on it three times to shut it, which was better than usual. Jack shrugged, and buckled the trunk closed. His wand was on his desk, and he grabbed it before leaving the room. Jack lived out of his trunk when he came home for the summer, and so the room was as impersonal and bland as it had been a few years ago, when Greg and Tatiana moved to the house and gave Jack the pre-furnished room. The walls were a pale blue, the curtains white and pristine. The bed was neatly made, because for all of his untidiness, Jack didn't like others cleaning up his messes. Well, almost all of his messes. Pranks were an entirely different story.

After brushing his teeth, Jack headed down the hall and into the kitchen. Greg, a tall, fit man with dark brown hair and green eyes, turned to smile at Jack when he came in. Tatiana handed him a plate of food, brushing the boy's head affectionately. She was a marathon runner, small and thin with pale skin and light brown hair.

The motherly gesture made the Jack's teeth clench, but he allowed it, because if he pushed her hand away, Tatiana would start getting all

emotional again. Greg would sit Jack down and look at him in that knowing way, as if Greg was Jack's real father. Yeah, that was the problem; Tatiana and Greg _weren't _his parents.

They acted like they were, but Jack had known from a very young age that they weren't. He wasn't sure if it was his magic that made him remember, or if it was the trauma, but theâ€|_incident_...was still fresh in his mind. The Muggle therapists Jack had seen all told him that he was too young to remember details of the fire, too young to remember his family, but that's where they were wrong.

_Mummy and Daddy were screaming, the smoke hurt his lungs, the fire was burning burning burning and little Emma was _crying_â€"

Of course, Jack never told his aunt and uncle about his unfortunate memory, or any of the therapists, because they wouldn't believe him. They'd all smile sadly, and say "It's okay, Jack, we understand."

They didn't understand.

But Jack was beyond caring about what they thought, because soon he'd be able to move out of his aunt and uncle's place. His seventeenth birthday was on April 3rd, and from that moment on he wasn't legally bound to stay with Greg and Tatiana anymore.

April couldn't come fast enough.

"Are you all packed?" Tatiana asked kindly, and Jack nodded, sitting down at the table and shoveling down his food as quickly as he could. The faster he ate, the faster they would be at Kings Cross.

The sound of water running and dishes clinking together filled the silence for a few minutes as Jack finished his breakfast and Greg cleaned the dishes.

Greg wiped his hands, and Jack put his dish in the sink before rejoining him and Tatiana in the living room. Greg had Jack's trunk in one hand, and Jack relieved him of it.

"I don't mind getting it, Jack. It's not all that heavy," Greg offered, and Jack shook his head.

"It's fine, I got it. Can we go?"

Greg and Tatiana sent each other a quick look, and Jack had to take a deep breath and count to ten. He was so close to calling them out on it, to demanding that they stop treating him like a child and actually _talk _to him. Maybe that was why he hated them so much. They were so stuck in playing the part of parents that they ignored what _Jack_ needed. Jack didn't need parents or siblings â€" he had already had and lost those.

A few hours later, Greg was pulling into Kings Cross. Jack scrambled out of the car, getting a cart and lifting his trunk onto it. Greg and Tatiana chatted with him, attempting to pull him into the conversation, but Jack was too close to finally _leaving_ to put much thought into answering. He maneuvered through the masses of people trying to get to their trains, his mood lightening with every step he took. Platform 7, Platform 8â€|only one moreâ€|.there!

A large brick wall separated the hanging signs of Platform 9 and Platform 10. Jack turned to his uncle and aunt, smiling for the first time that morning.

"Well, goodbye," Jack said, and turned to leave. But of course, Tatiana grabbed him, and hugged him tightly. Her perfume was something expensive and flowery, and as much as he wanted to hate it the scent was oddly comforting. Greg's hand was warm on Jack's shoulder, and for a split second Jack wanted to believe that they were his parents. He wished he could forget about what had happened all those years ago, but of course he couldn't.

Jack gently but firmly pulled away, and gave a small wave before casually walking into the brick wall, briskly and confidently enough so that the Muggle passerby wouldn't notice.

The thick fog of magic was cloying, but Jack was so used to it that he wasn't the least bit fazed by it. A brief moment of darkness, and Jack was walking into the crowded train platform. He glanced up, and saw the golden sign that read: Platform 9 ¾.

"Well, look who decided to show up!" a thick Australian accent drawled, and Jack grinned as he turned to face the speaker. Aster Mund was tall, taller than Jack, with broad shoulders, bright green eyes and black hair that hung loose around his ears.

"Aster!" Jack greeted his best friend, and the two hugged tightly, Aster thumping Jack on the back with gusto. Something was poking against Jack's chest, and he pulled back. Blue eyes widened, and he crowed at the sight of a shiny Head Boy badge.

"Ha, I knew it! Didn't I tell you that you'd get it? Wait, you didn't think that this was worth mentioning in your letter?"

Aster rolled his eyes. "And what, get a whole roll of parchment tellin' me that you told me so? No thanks, mate."

"I'm hurt, Aster. You know that I would never!"

"Save it, Jack. And don't think for one bloody second that this gives you free reign to do whatever you want!"

"Wouldn't dream of it, man. Wouldn't dream of it."

Aster sighed. "And to think I actually missed you!"

"Aw, you do care!"

"Now you are dreaming, mate! Are we gonna find a compartment or not?"

The two teens made their way to the steaming train, saying hello to a few of their Slytherin housemates along the way.

"Woah," Jack muttered as they passed a couple ferociously kissing and groping each other. "Jake and Terra, huh? Who would've thought?"

Aster made a face at the display, and Jack laughed at his friend's

discomfort. "C'mon, Aster, surely you haven't been a lily-white all summer! Surely there was someone!"

Aster's concerted effort to not meet Jack's eyes was answer enough.

"Aha! So there was someone!"

Aster didn't respond, and after a few more jabs Jack let the subject drop. Aster was a very private person, and five years of being best friends with him had given Jack a healthy respect for his personal space. Besides, it only took a few shots of Firewhiskey for Aster to loosen up and spill, so Jack would find out one way or the other. Speaking of Firewhiskey, Jack made a mental note to check with the seventh-year Miranda Fuller about getting a few bottlesâ€|

Aster found an empty compartment, and he and Jack made themselves at home. A few more Slytherins found their way into the compartment. They were a few of Aster and Jack's friends; a quirky but outgoing boy named Sandy and a very beautiful, energetic girl named Tamara, or Tammy for short. Sandy and Tammy were a year below Aster and Jack, but it didn't matter all that much.

Soon, the compartment was filled with conversation and laughter, and Jack was so caught up that he almost didn't notice the train beginning to move. He looked out the window, his chest swelling with joy at the sight of the buildings turning into trees and countryside. He caught Aster's eye, and the two smiled at each other. Jack leaned back into his seat, allowing himself to relax fully for the first time since the beginning of summer.

He was finally going home.

* * *

><p>Rapunzel Lockwood's hands and face were smudged with dirt, but she didn't think to wipe it away, too focused on making sure the moonlace was properly in place. She had placed it in the pot the night before, and now she was just making sure that the pot was clean. It was a gift, after all.</p>

Moving quickly, Rapunzel brushed the side with magical paint that would gleam all sorts of different colors. Her tongue stuck out the corner of her mouth as she carefully wrote a name along the pot. She would have to get ready to leave for Kings Cross soon, but first she needed to make sure that the gift was perfect.

Glancing at her watch, she squeaked when she saw that it was nearly 8:30 AM. Dad and Elena would be awake by now!

Rapunzel jumped up, grabbing the pot and racing out the large greenhouse. It had been Rapunzel's mother's greenhouse, when she was still alive. Rapunzel paused before closing the door, touching the golden wind-chime that hung there. Her father, Elliot Lockwood, had given the wind-chime to his wife at the time of their wedding. It was charmed to play pretty songs when the wind was quiet, an unusual quality that never failed to delight Rapunzel when she was growing up.

Rapunzel had never met her mother. Primrose, a skilled Herbologist

and witch, died a few hours after Rapunzel was born, but not before holding and naming her. According to her father, Rapunzel's mother smiled through the pain, hugging her daughter close and saying that she had never seen a more perfect child.

Elliot still had numerous pictures, and after pouring over them for hours and hours, Rapunzel imagined that she could remember being held and her mother's green eyes and blonde hair. It was because of Primrose that Rapunzel chose to keep her hair so long; at a very young age Rapunzel took one look at her mother's long braided hair and wanted nothing more than to copy her. And so, ever since then, Rapunzel's thick golden hair always fell below her waist. Rapunzel hardly ever had it down and loose, though. For practicality, she usually charmed it into an intricate braid, though when she was home she had to braid it by hand.

Rapunzel burst into the kitchen, breathing hard. Elliot and Elena were just entering, and laughed at her state of dress. Elliot and Elena had been dating for four years now, and Elena had only been living with Rapunzel and her father for one of those years.

Elena was very different from Rapunzel's mother, but still very beautiful to Rapunzel. She had short red hair and dark brown eyes, and was nearly as tall as Rapunzel's father. Her face wasn't as striking as Primrose's, but there was an endearing quality to Elena's features that made up for it. She worked alongside Elliot in the Ministry's Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office.

"Sweetheart, what on earth?" Elliot asked, and Rapunzel beamed.

"Congratulations! Welcome to the family, Elena!" she cried, offering Elena the pot of moonlace. Elena's name was written on the side in slightly crooked cursive, and flickered with all the colors of the rainbow.

Elliot's eyes bugged out slightly. "Rapunzel, how on earth did you know that?" he began, and Rapunzel waited until Elena held the pot in one hand. Then, she lifted the woman's free left hand, showing her father the simple diamond ring on her fourth finger.

"I've known for weeks that you were going to ask her, Dad. You're not as sneaky as you think you are. Also, I saw this on her finger when you came back from your date last night! I'm just so happy it's finally happened!!"

Elena was smiling at Rapunzel's enthusiasm, and she set down the pot to properly hug Rapunzel. "Thank you so much for the gift, Rapunzel. It's moonlace, right?"

"Uh huh. Professor Sprout gave me some before summer break. It's bioluminescent, and it only flowers at night. The flowers smell like peppermint, which is strange but really nice!"

Elliot had calmed down some, and chuckled to himself. "Well, this saves me the trouble of breaking the news to you over Christmas."

"So when's the wedding?" Rapunzel asked, grabbing a peach from the fruit bowl. She was never really that hungry in the mornings, but

since she wouldn't be able to eat properly until dinnertime Rapunzel felt that she should eat something.

Elena poured some cereal, frowning. "Well, your father and I haven't picked an exact date," she admitted, smiling sheepishly.

"But we're thinking early summer, so it doesn't interfere with NEWTs. You're done by when, June 10th?"

"I'm not sure, but that sounds about right. I'll owl you when I find out for sure," Rapunzel replied, wiping at some juice on her chin. Elena got the jam from the cupboard, and sat down at the table. Rapunzel beamed at both of them.

It really was great that they were getting married. Elliot had waited until Rapunzel was ten before dating again, but the first few women just weren't the right ones. Rapunzel hadn't liked any of them, and was beginning to get discouraged when one day, Elliot brought Elena home. Then, everything changed.

Elena made Elliot happy, and Rapunzel couldn't be gladder that she was here to stay. There was no one who could replace Primrose, but at the same time Rapunzel didn't want her father to be alone for the rest of his life. She liked to think that her mother would have thought similarly.

Rapunzel finished her peach and raced to shower and get dressed. She brushed and braided her hair, using sparing amounts of Madam Tullio's Detangler. The potion worked to add shine to her hair without making it greasy, and kept her hair untangled even when Rapunzel took it out of her braid. It also smelled like honeysuckle, which was Rapunzel's favorite scent.

Once her hair was in place, Rapunzel pulled on a pair of jeans and a purple long-sleeved shirt. Her Hogwarts attire was in her trunk; she'd put her robes on once she was on the train. Rapunzel hummed as she examined herself in the mirror, tucking an invisible strand of hair behind her ear. Her green eyes scanned her face and neck for any stubborn dirt. Finally, she nodded in satisfaction.

"Okay, let's go!" Rapunzel called, and stowed her wand in her pocket, using both hands to carry her trunk. Elliot and Elena had finished eating, and were waiting by the door. With a flick of her wand, Elena levitated Rapunzel's trunk and moved it to the trunk of the car. Thanking her, Rapunzel followed the two adults out of the house and into the sunshine.

Elliot Lockwood lived in the countryside, an hour and a half from London. It was fall, but the fields and trees were still stubbornly green. Rapunzel basked in the warmth, closing her eyes briefly and breathing in the smell of her home. She would only be gone until Christmas, but she would still miss it.

"Rapunzel, are you ready?" her father asked, and the girl nodded, hopping into the car and closing the door behind her.

* * *

><p>"Aaaaaannnnnnnn' with a swing of her mighty arm, DunBroch sends the Blugder straight into Overland's fat, oversized face!

Looks like the _Over_land's goin' _Under_land for this one, six feet under it looks like! The crowd goes wild, Gryffindor's on _fire_!"

Merida DunBroch whooped, swinging her imaginary bat and performing a victory loop around the small makeshift Quidditch arena set up by the stables. Her fiery curls streamed behind her as she flew, and her laugh echoed in the empty field. The early morning sun streamed in through the clouds, and Merida blinked, finishing her loop and wheeling around to face away from the blinding sunshine.

In the center of nearly fifty acres of land was the DunBroch Manor. Thanks to Merida's mother, it was fully furnished with all of the latest finery. Tasteful finery, but still much too fine for Merida to appreciate. The pale blue eyes of the girl passed over the grand walls of the manor, instead locking on the great lake near the manor. Now that she could appreciate. What was a better way to cool down on a hot summer's day than a dip in the lake? Merida had yet to find one, and a fond smile appeared on her face.

The smile slid off of her face when a yawn nearly split her jaw in half. Her sleepless night was beginning to catch up to her, and Merida scowled. The memories of the evening before were threatening to surface. The argument with her mother had worn at her mind all night, leaving her tossing and turning.

"Me, marry? Mum's out of her mind!" she muttered, leaning her head down so that her forehead touched the warm wood of her Firebolt. Her father, Fergus DunBroch, had gotten it for her on her thirteenth birthday. It was the most precious thing she owned, and she valued it more than her own life. It let her fly faster than she would on a horse or on a train, and she adored the feeling of the wind ripping at her hair as she soared.

In the sky, at least, she was free.

Merida sat on her broom for a while longer, until the gentle ringing of her wristwatch drew her out of her melancholy. The pretty silver watch said that it was half past eight, and the Scottish girl groaned but dutifully began her descent. She unconsciously curled her legs up as far as they would go, as if to avoid the inevitable moment where she would no longer be airborne. She hovered above the ground for a few seconds, and then realized what she was doing.

"Don't be a coward," she hissed to herself, and purposefully slid off of her broom, feeling the heavy tug of gravity when her feet touched the ground. She determinedly didn't look up at the sky, didn't look at the three wooden goal hoops that were more beautiful than anything. More beautiful than any stupid alliance with the MacGuffin family.

"Merida, in a few short months you will be of age, and as firstborn it is your duty to marry favorably!"

"But Mum, I don't want to marry! I want to playâ€""

"Play Quidditch? Merida, you can't honestly think that your little hobby will go anywhere? You are a DunBroch, you are my daughter, and I will not let you throw away your chance for happiness."

_ "My chance for happiness? Haven't you been listenin' to a word I've said? Playin' Quidditch makes me happy, Mum!" _

_ "I can see that you need more time to come to terms with this. We'll lay the subject to rest until you come home for Christmas. By then, you'll have had time to think about what's best for you and this family." _

Merida sighed, rubbing her forehead with her free hand. She slipped in through the side entrance to the manor and slowly walked up the stairs to her room. Usually she'd run up the stairs, but that morning she couldn't seem to find the energy.

Her room was the only room her mother's decorating hadn't sullied. Merida had pushed her father until he gave her permission to decorate her own room, and she couldn't be happier with the chance to do what she liked.

A simple red rug adorned the floor, and a comfortable armchair was tilted toward the fireplace, her favorite book dog-eared and worn in its position on the chair seat.

Posters of various Quidditch teams covered the wall parallel to the door. The Scottish National team was one of her favorites by default, but if she were to be honest with herself Ireland was slightly more skilled than Scotland. On the wall nearest her bed were pictures of Merida's time at Hogwarts. There were pictures of Merida with Agnus Tully, her best friend, both of them smiling widely at the camera and laughing. Several of the pictures starred the Gryffindor Quidditch team, taken after winning the Quidditch Cup. Merida had been Beater ever since her second year, and she and the rest of the team had worked their tails off to get skilled enough to win the Cup two years in a row. If they kept up their hard work, they'd make it three years in a row this season.

A fire was crackling in the fireplace opposite her bed, and Merida pulled off her boots, setting them near the hearth to warm up. She stripped out of her leggings and turtleneck, and went to take a long shower. After she was done and dried, she snatched up the robes that were lying out on her bed. She pulled them on, and tried unsuccessfully to tie her red and gold tie.

"Damn it all!" Merida growled, and furiously tugged and folded, left with a loose and messy knot instead of a neat tie. She left it, too frustrated to take the time to fix it. Merida ran a hand through her hair, silently thanking her father for already having shrunk her school luggage. It would make leaving a much quicker process.

The trunk was tiny; the size of a chalkboard eraser, and Merida put it in the pocket inside of her robes before securely clipping her robes shut. She didn't want her robes coming undone when she was flying to Hogwarts, now would she?

Merida scoffed, and grabbed her Firebolt, moving with more energy at the thought of Hogwarts. She was almost free of her mother; she was almost free of being the heir to an estate. At school, she was just Miss DunBroch, a Quidditch-loving Gryffindor. She was just Merida.

That was all she ever wanted to be.

The Scottish witch made sure that her wand was securely clipped to the wand-holder strapped to her forearm, and then let the sleeve fall back over it. The mechanism was genius, really. One press of a lever with her middle finger, and her wand would drop into her hand in the span of a second.

Merida ran down the stairs to the manor dining room, where she knew her father would be waiting to send her off. She found her father sitting at the table, along with her triplet brothers, Harris, Hubert and Hamish. Their red curly heads barely topped the table, but they managed to get to the fruit tarts well enough.

Fergus DunBroch looked up from his porridge, and beamed at the sight of his daughter.

"I take it yer ready to go?"

Merida nodded, and grabbed a few tarts for herself, sticking her tongue out at the indignant sputters of her brothers. She sat down for a few minutes, focusing on eating her breakfast while Fergus finished his.

"Merida, I know that we're not suppose' to talk about it, but I jus' want you to knowâ€|yer mother is just tryin' to help. She means well," Fergus said consolingly, and Merida didn't answer. She wasn't trying to be stubborn; she just didn't know what to say.

Fergus didn't seem to mind her lack of an answer, and scraped the last of his porridge out of his bowl before getting to his feet. Merida hastened to mimic him, and Fergus turned to his sons.

"Alright, up with the lot of you, time to say goodbye to Merida!"

"That's right lads, kiss your poor lass of a sister goodbye!" Merida taunted, leaning down and poking her cheek for emphasis. The three boys whined simultaneously, but then their eyes lit up. They exchanged identical looks of triumph.

"Uh oh," Fergus muttered, and Merida watched as her three brothers trotted over to her, tarts in hand. Each one looked her in the eye, innocent as wee little lambs.

"Bye Merida!" they chorused, and before Merida could do a thing to stop them, smeared the tarts all over their faces and jumped up to kiss Merida's face.

"Blech!" Merida cried, grabbing for a napkin to wipe the combination of jam and crumbs off of her face. The triplets waved, and were gone before Merida could do much as threaten. Fergus chortled, and patted Merida's shoulder.

"C'mon lass, let's get you on the road," he suggested, and Merida grabbed her Firebolt before following him outside. The cobblestone path leading to the courtyard was smooth against her shoes, warmed by the sunshine. Hogwarts was only two hours away by Firebolt; the castle was in the valley just beyond the Reilh mountain range that resided west of the DunBroch estate.

"Mum isn't comin' to send me off this year, is she?" Merida asked, and Fergus shook his head.

"I'm afraid she's still a bitâ€|furiousâ€|about last night. Aye, better that you both have some time apart. To simmer down, y'know?"

"Aye," Merida agreed, and gripped her Firebolt tighter as they entered the courtyard. It was a very peaceful place made of white stone, a pretty fountain in the center of it. The pillars were carved with Scottish heroes of old, along with beasts and flowers. Prickly vines grew along the low walls, small purple flowers bright against the stone.

Merida hugged her father tightly, burying her face into the strength of his embrace. He kissed the top of her head, and leaned back until his daughter looked up at him.

"Go get 'em, lass."

"I will, Dad."

Merida pulled away, and mounted her broom. It hovered, waiting for her command, and she gave her father one last grin before leaning forward and shooting into the sky.

3. First Impressions

I'm on FIRE!

I seriously can't stop writing this story! I try to write other chapters for other stories, and I can think about is this story and how I'm going to get the Big Four together!

Ah!

Ooooh this chapter is GOOD! We've got some interaction between them, which is ALWAYS exciting!

I'm trying not to get discouraged at how few reviews I'm getting. I _am _writing this mostly for me, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't writing it for you guys, because I am, in a way. I'd really appreciate feedback, guys, I want to know what I can do to improve this story!

If you like it and want more, or have any questions/comments...

**PLEASE REVIEW! **

* * *

><p>Chapter 2: First Impressions</p>

* * *

><p>Rapunzel smiled to herself as she made her way to the Prefects Carriage, her Prefect badge pinned securely to her robes. The train

had left Kings Cross half an hour ago, and instead of finding a compartment Rapunzel had to attend a meeting and sort out patrolling schedules. She didn't mind too much, but had been hoping to spend a little more time with her best friend, Flynn Rider â€“ his real name was Eugene, but Rapunzel was one of the only people who knew that.<p>

As she walked, she caught sight of a tall Head Boy with cropped white-blonde hair coming out of one of the compartments. Her face brightened, and she leapt at the Gryffindor, hugging him from behind.

"Max!" she cried, and Maximus Corona turned his head back to see his attacker, tensing for a moment before recognizing her. The seventh year snorted, and put his hands over her arms, leaning back to glare sternly at her.

"Jeez, Rapunzel, I thought you were a Slytherin. You really should be more careful!"

Rapunzel laughed, and released her friend. Max's face softened as he threw an arm around her shoulders, planting a quick kiss on the top of her head. Max was a friend of the Lockwood family, and had been close friends with Rapunzel since she was very small. He was like the brother she never had.

"Rapunzel!" a female voice called, and Rapunzel looked back to see a pretty Ravenclaw Head Girl walking toward them, arms outstretched for a hug. Her most distinctive feature was her emerald-green hair, courtesy of her being a Metamorphagus. Pascal Thompson was Max's girlfriend of two years, and even before that she was always kind to Rapunzel. Dating Max had only worked to bring the girls closer.

"Pascal, I've missed you! How was your summer at Max's?" Rapunzel asked after they had hugged. Pascal's dark hazel eyes shone as she smiled. The hallway was big enough for three to walk side-by-side, so Max put one arm around Rapunzel and Rapunzel linked arms with Pascal so they could talk.

"It was great! His parents were really nice, but I can see where Max gets his intensity," Pascal admitted quietly, and Max scoffed.

"I'm not _that_ intense!"

"Says the guy who chased a couple of first years across the castle, yelling at the top of his lungs!" Pascal commented casually, and Max sputtered.

"They were breaking curfew!"

"Only by a few minutes, _if_ that."

"Rules are made for a reason, Cal."

"Is that so?" Pascal fixed her boyfriend with a knowing stare, and Max's cheeks flushed a bright pink. Rapunzel glanced between the two of them, and burst out laughing. She could take a good guess as to what Pascal was referring to, and decided to give the couple some

privacy.

Rapuzel hugged Pascal's arm before letting go. "I'll see you guys in there, okay?"

Max nodded, and Rapunzel gave them one last smile before turning to continue down the hall. A quick glance back showed Max stepping closer to Pascal, his hand curving around her waist as she pulled him down for a kiss. Rapunzel sighed happily at the sight, and practically skipped into the Prefect Carriage.

She slid open the door, closing it shut behind her before turning to face the people gathered there. It wasn't time for the meeting to start just yet, so people were still milling around and chatting. The fifth and sixth year prefects were all sitting on the comfortable couches, some even seating themselves on the floor near their friends' feet. Rapunzel saw her fellow Hufflepuff Prefects sitting on the yellow and black couches, and made her way over to them.

"Rapunzel!" the group of girls and boys chorused, and Rapunzel greeted them all before sitting down on the floor, leaning against Lilian Rosso's legs â€“ the couch was full. The dark-skinned girl immediately began stroking Rapunzel's hair, and Rapunzel leaned back to smile at the girl. Lilian always liked to play with people's hair, and Rapunzel was so used to it by now that it didn't even faze her.

Rapunzel listened to her fellow Hufflepuffs talk about their summers, content to just observe and listen instead of contributing. Her light green scanned the rest of the carriage, watching other House Prefects laugh and exchange stories. A few friendly faces stuck out to her, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors that she had befriended over the years. They waved when she met their eyes, and she made sure to smile and wave back.

The Slytherin section of the carriage was boisterous and excited, but there were no wizards or witches Rapunzel was friends with. For some reason, this made her sad. It seemed strange that while the Head Girls and Boys promoted House unity, there was still such obvious division between Slytherin and the other Houses.

One of the Slytherin Head Boys caught her eye, and she was surprised to see Aster Mund wearing the badge. Wasn't he a sixth year, like Rapunzel was? The Head badge only went to seventh years, as far as Rapunzel knew. Had they made an exception for Aster?

She shook her head, unable to come up with a solid answer. It really wasn't any of her business. She trusted the Headmaster to choose someone qualified, and if he had chosen Asterâ€¦then she wouldn't question it. The Slytherins as a whole were never very nice to Rapunzel, but Aster had never been cruel. He wasn't nice, per se, but he had never been anything but cordial to her when they happened to interact.

Maybe as Head Boy, he would influence the way the rest of his House treated the Hufflepuffs.

Rapunzel wasn't an idiot. She knew that to most of the school, Hufflepuffs were the "nice" kids, the ones who let people walk all

over them. Hufflepuffs weren't anything special, they were the neutral party, the House that accepted even the poorest and least worthy students.

But that didn't discourage Rapunzel. She loved how gentle and devoted her House was. She relished the fact that she could walk into the cozy Common Room and feel completely safe and accepted. The other Houses had standards that their students had to meet. Gryffindors had to be brave and fierce, Slytherins had to be cunning and ambitious, Ravenclaws were pushed to be clever and methodical. But Hufflepuff didn't force traits onto its students. Hufflepuff encouraged students to simply be themselves, not what the rest of the world declared them to be.

Hufflepuffs were brave, they were clever, and they were ambitious. They just didn't like to boldly advertise their achievements. As a whole, they were a modest lot.

Max and Pascal slipped into the carriage and joined the other Heads at the front of the room, their faces completely innocent and blank. But Rapunzel grinned impishly at the two of them, and Pascal rolled her eyes while Max furtively stared at the ceiling. A few more Prefects trickled in, and finally everyone was there.

"Hello everyone!" the Gryffindor Head Girl announced, which put an end to all conversation. "To start the meeting, I'd like to introduce the newest Prefects!"

Once that was done, the new Head Boys and Girls were announced, and Rapunzel cheered loudly when Pascal and Max were named. Once the introductions were done for good, the Head Boys and Girls began to discuss patrolling schedules for the duration of the journey to Hogwarts.

Rapunzel listened carefully for her name, and was surprised to find that she was being paired with a Head Boy. And not just any Head Boy!

"Aster Mund, you'll be patrolling with Rapunzel Lockwood. You'll be surveying the last three cars. You know the drill, just check in with the students and make sure everything's under control."

"Should be simple," Aster affirmed coolly, his Australian accent a surprise to Rapunzel. How had she gone five years without registering that he had an Australian accent? She must have not been paying attention at _all_!

"Okay," Rapunzel said, trying to keep her tone cheerful. But inside, her heart was sinking. There went any chance for friendly conversation during her patrol. Aster wasn't exactly a talker, at least not to people he wasn't friends with, and Rapunzel sighed as she followed Aster out of the carriage and to the end of the train. She knew for a fact that the back of the train was where a particular group of Slytherins was seated.

It was going to be a long trip.

* * *

><p>The wind was cool and crisp, and Hiccup breathed in deeply,

smiling at the shivering sensation that filled his chest. Toothless growled happily, letting out a raspy attempt at a roar. The wizard laughed, and shifted on his broom. He was making great time â€“ the trip usually took four hours, but thanks to the wind he had made it in three.<p>

Hogwarts grounds stretched before him, and in the distance was the castle, about the size of his palm. He angled upward, going higher until he pierced the cover of clouds. The bright blue sky went on forever, and, feeling playful, Hiccup told Toothless to hang on tight before angling into a sharp dive. He spotted the large courtyard just outside the Astronomy tower, and aimed for it, picking up speed until he couldn't hear anything except the excited beating of his heart.

Just before hitting the ground, Hiccup pulled up, his toes brushing the grass as he spun a bit. Toothless jumped out of the basket, rolling around in the freshly cut lawn with a purr of satisfaction. Toothless always loved the grass at Hogwarts for some reason, and Hiccup shrugged before sliding off of his broom. With the ease of someone who had done it millions of times before, Hiccup unhooked the platform and harness off of his broom. He then took his trunk out of his pocket and tapped it with his wand. It immediately regained its original size, and with another muttered spell Hiccup sent his luggage and Toothless' basket up to Ravenclaw tower. He'd move it up to his room after the Feast tonight.

"Hey buddy, how about we go see Hagridâ€"" Hiccup began, tucking his wand into his inner robe pocket, but paused at Toothless' sudden tensing. The kneazle's ears were perked, and his electric green eyes were fixed upward. He grunted at Hiccup, nodding frantically to the sky, and Hiccup turned to look up.

A tiny figure on a broom was floating high above them, bright red hair visible even from such a great distance. Suddenly, the figure slid over the side of the broom, and fell. Hiccup gasped, and the boy was on his Nimbus and in the air before he could blink.

He raced toward the falling figure, angling himself alongside the person because if he tried to meet him or her head on, he'd get hit so hard he'd fall off of his broom as well.

As he drew closer, he saw that it was a girl, and not just any girl. It was Merida DunBroch, the Gryffindor Beater. Her round face was slack, her red curls whipping around her face as she fell, her back facing the ground.

Hiccup dove down alongside her, and with one quick motion grabbed her around the waist and tugged her onto his broom. Then, he pulled out of his dive. Merida was limp and unresponsive, and he frantically readjusted so that she was steady. Her knees bent over one side of the broom, and Hiccup securely held her upper body to him with one arm, the other hand keeping a firm grip on the broom handle. He glanced up, and saw that her Firebolt was slowly sinking down toward its owner, and when it got close enough Hiccup released his own broom and grabbed it.

Okay, now to land without holding onto his broom, while keeping an unconscious girl from falling. Oh, and he had to make sure he didn't drop her Firebolt. The Scottish girl would have his head if he so

much as scratched it, disregarding the fact that Hiccup had saved her life.

Wait.

Hiccup had just saved someone's life.

The realization should have made him proud, happy even, but instead it filled him with a sick feeling of horror. What if he had arrived at Hogwarts an hour later, as he should have? What if he hadn't chosen to land in the Astronomy courtyard? If he hadn't, Merida would have died. Hiccup and Merida weren't friends, or even acquaintances, but even so the thought of her dying wasn't a pleasant one.

Merida's soft mumbling brought him back to the present, and he floated toward the ground, very slowly so that he would be able to keep his balance.

"Don'tâ€| Mum's lost 'er marblesâ€|_under_â€|landâ€| "

Hiccup frowned, not quite sure if he should respond or just ignore her. He chose to do the latter, trying to keep her hair out of his mouth â€" he had forgotten how much of it there was. And it wasn't all smooth and straight like that one Hufflepuff girl's, oh no, it was practically an afro, poofing and curling all over the place. Hiccup spat a curl out of his mouth, lifting his chin up so high that he was practically looking up.

Finally, he made it to the ground, and he gently tossed the Firebolt onto the grass before securing her in his arms and sliding off of his Nimbus. She wasn't exactly light, but thankfully not heavy to the point where Hiccup was afraid he'd drop her. Hiccup looked to Toothless, who was examining Merida with curious eyes. Hiccup leaned down, letting Merida's legs drop for a moment while he picked up her Firebolt. It seemed to sense his intent, and hovered at a perfect height for him to mount.

Hiccup had always wanted to ride a Firebolt, but he wished that the opportunity had come under very different circumstances. Hiccup eased himself onto the Firebolt, and made sure Merida was secure before allowing the broom to rise. While the Firebolt was listening to him, Hiccup could feel a slight resistance, a sluggishness that made Hiccup very aware that it wasn't his broom.

Hiccup turned to Toothless. "Can you watch my broom, buddy? I'm going to get her to the Hospital Wing."

The black kneazle nodded, and curled up next to Hiccup's Nimbus 2001, tail curled protectively around the handle. No one was touching that broom if Toothless had anything to say about it. Hiccup thanked his friend, and gripped the Firebolt handle with one hand. He made his way toward the entrance into the castle, and picked up speed once he got into the larger halls. The castle was empty, and so he allowed himself to pick up speed as he passed the entrance to the Grand Staircase. The Hospital Wing was on the first floor, so as to prevent injured people from having to climb any stairs, and it was only minutes later that Hiccup arrived at his destination.

Hiccup slid off of the Firebolt, which drifted slowly to the ground.

Swinging his arm under Merida's knees, Hiccup used his foot to knock on the door. He waited, and was about to knock again when the double doors swung open. Madam Pomfrey, an older woman with a kind face, stood there, and her eyes widened at the sight of the unconscious Merida.

"Oh goodness, the term hasn't even begun! Bring her inside Mr. Haddock, bring her inside and tell me exactly what happened," she demanded, opening the door for him and gesturing for him to lay her down on the nearest bed.

"I was in the Astronomy courtyard when I saw Merida hovering on her broom. She fell off, and I caught her. She didn't wake up when I shook her, and she was mumbling some stuff earlier," Hiccup explained, taking a step back so that Madam Pomfrey could examine the girl. Merida's hair nearly covered the entire pillow, glinting like fire in the light coming in from the glass windows.

Hiccup nervously twisted his shirt between his hands while the Healer went over Merida's form with the glowing tip of her wand. A minute later, Pomfrey relaxed, and let out a soft chuckle.

"Oh, well this is a relief. The child's just suffering from sleep deprivation. She must have fallen asleep on her broom! All she needs is rest, I'm glad to report. Are you friends with Miss DunBroch, Mr. Haddock?"

"Not exactly, no," Hiccup admitted, and Pomfrey smiled.

"Well, in any case, she's going to be perfectly alright. I'll be sure to wake her up in time for the Sorting, and I'll let her know what happened."

"Actually," Hiccup interjected. "Would you mindâ€|_not_ telling her it was me who caught her? I really just want to put it behind me."

Hiccup didn't want Merida to feel indebted to him. He didn't want to be known as a hero, all he wanted was for things to go on as normal. Do well in school, play Quidditch, go on Forbidden Forest excursions with Hagrid...

Pomfrey looked puzzled, but nodded. "A strange request, but alright. Is that her Firebolt out in the hall?"

"Yes ma'am. I'll get it," Hiccup said, and quickly retrieved the broom. He leaned it on the bedside table, and thanked the Healer before high-tailing it out of there. The Hospital Wing gave him the shivers, and he rubbed his arms as he walked back to the courtyard where Toothless was waiting.

Hiccup reached the courtyard, and his spirits rose when he saw a familiar half-giant crouched down and rubbing the kneazle's ears. Toothless' head shot up when he smelled Hiccup, and the hulking man turned.

"Hagrid!" Hiccup called, and ran to greet the groundskeeper. Rubeus Hagrid clapped the boy on the back, so hard that Hiccup nearly ate a mouthful of grass. Hiccup grinned; Hagrid's greeting always made him feel warm inside, unlike Stoick's impersonal one.

"Hiccup, m'boy! It's good t'have ya back!"

"I was actually just on my way to see you!"

"Really? Well that's great, 'cause I was about t'go check on Marigold. Care t'join me? We've got a good five hours 'till the Sortin'."

"How close is she?" Hiccup asked, grabbing his Nimbus and falling into step beside the half-giant. Toothless trotted on Hiccup's other side, nipping at his friend's hand. Hiccup obliged the kneazle by rubbing his head as they walked.

"I'd give 'er a week, tops. Y'should see her, Hiccup, all cluckin' and hissin'! She nearly took off m'hand las' week, when I was makin' my feedin' rounds."

"Do you really think she could have twins?" Hiccup asked, unable to see the possibility of a hippogriff giving birth to two whole eggs. Hagrid shrugged, and Toothless's ears shot up at the sound of a boarhound barking. They were atop the hill that overlooked the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and Hagrid's hut was rugged and familiar next to the pumpkin patch.

The kneazle shot off toward Hagrid's hut like a black arrow, roaring in that way of his. Fang the boarhound barreled out the hut, tail wagging so violently that his entire lower body moved along with it.

"Aw, look at 'em," Hagrid crooned, and Hiccup grinned, watching as Toothless and Fang playfully wrestled with each other. Toothless' purring was so loud that it was audible to the two wizards on top of the hill. Eventually the two stopped roughhousing and instead raced across the field, Fang barking in delight and Toothless leaping to tackle Fang mid-stride.

"A long summer, eh?" Hagrid commented, and Hiccup felt his throat tighten at the half-giant's knowing tone. Hagrid was the only person at Hogwarts that knew about Hiccup's relationship with his father and the other islanders. Hagrid had recognized Hiccup's desire to work with magical creatures when Hiccup took his first Care of Magical Creatures class in third year. The groundskeeper took the boy under his wing soon after.

Hiccup nodded, swallowing hard. "Yeah. It's nice to be back," he replied, and Hagrid looked down at Hiccup, his gaze serious but still gentle.

"C'mon lad. You can tell me all 'bout it on the way."

* * *

><p>"Hey, look who's patrolling with Aster," Tammy murmured, and Jack paused to follow the girl's gaze. A laugh escaped him the second his eyes locked on the target.</p>

"Looks like poor wittle Hufflepuff has wandered out of her garden," Sandy said in a high voice, and Jack smirked.

Tammy rolled her eyes, and returned her attention to her romance novel. The girl was obsessed with the vile things, and Jack took a moment to make a face at the sappy title "no joke, the title was Adventures on Pleasure Island. It was practically porn, just in written form. If Tammy were any other girl, he would have made a suggestive joke about how if Tammy wanted to know about sex, she only needed to ask and Jack would gladly tell her.

But the girl was too much like his sister for that, and so Jack settled for hardcore judging. Silent hardcore judging, of course. Jack was pretty ballsy, but not that ballsy.

Tammy may put on the act of a pureblood china doll with doe eyes and a sweet smile, but most seemed to forget that she was a Slytherin. Slytherins were masters of disguise, and Tammy was an excellent example. No one had expected her to progress very far in the Slytherin Dueling Tournament last year, much less win the damn thing. But she had, and Jack was never able to look at her the same way.

Jack turned his attention back to the blonde Hufflepuff walking down the hall. She was trying so hard to look stern but failing miserably. Despite her best efforts, a smile kept appearing on her lips, ruining the Prefect mask she was trying to attain. How did the girl manage to wield any authority with that face? Well, she was a Hufflepuff, so he would be surprised if anyone took her seriously.

Lockwood, that's what her surname was. Jack couldn't recall her first name for the life of him. All he could remember was that it was unusual, something from a Muggle fairytale. Tatiana had read some of those to Jack when he was younger, but he had never paid much attention to them.

Sandy gave Jack a mischievous raise of his eyebrows, and waited until Aster passed before sending a quietly muttered jinx onto the floor of the hallway. Lockwood nearly walked into it, but she paused right before it, her brow creasing. Then, she waved her wand, wordlessly dispelling the Slipping Jinx and moving on with a carefree flick of her absolutely giant braid. Jack leaned forward to see that the end of it reached the small of her back, and couldn't help but feel a tiny bit of admiration.

Not only did she spot and dispel a jinx without uttering a word, but she also managed to lug around that enormous braid.

"How did she know it was there? She couldn't have heard me say the incantation!" Sandy grumbled, and Jack shrugged, just as clueless. Tammy sighed, glaring at the two boys over the top of her book.

"Because, Lockwood's magic-sensitive. Jack, I would have thought you of all people would have noticed it by now. You've had classes with her, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but I don't really pay attention to her," Jack defended, and Tammy shook her head in exasperation. Sandy opened his mouth to ask a question, but Tammy cut him off before he could ask.

"Magic sensitivity is a magical person's ability to sense magic; in the air, in an object, whatever. All living things sense magic, some

more than others. Muggles have the lowest sensitivity, then wizards and witches, then animals and plants. It's extremely rare, but some are born with enhanced sensitivity, on par with animals and plants."

"So she's what, psychic or something?" Jack asked, leaning forward so that his elbows rested on his knees. Tammy shook her head, her violet eyes flickering to where Sandy's jinx had been cast.

"No. Lockwood was able to sense a more concentrated pocket of magic where Sandy's jinx was, and with that she was able to feel what type of spell it was, allowing her to dispel it. This is only what I've read in books, so there could be more that I don't know, but I think that about sums it up."

Sandy huffed, and leaned back in his seat, his light blonde-brown hair sticking up from the static as he began rubbing his head against the fabric seat-cover. Tammy smiled at his childish antics, and returned to her riveting romance novel. Jack was left to ponder, twirling his wand between his fingers and making small blue sparks shower the ceiling of the compartment.

Two hours or so later, Aster and the Lockwood girl walked past again, and this time the girl made eye contact with Jack. Her eyes were green, not green like Aster's, a much lighter green than that. Her lips were smiling again, but it wasn't a happy smile. Jack blinked at his own train of thought, and recovered, sending her a cocky smirk before turning his attention to his wand.

The compartment door opening caught Jack's attention, and he brightened when Aster slipped into the space. The Lockwood girl was nowhere to be found, and so Jack relaxed.

"Oh, come down to mingle with us commoners?" Jack teased, and Aster gave his shoulder a half-hearted punch, slumping back and rubbing his temples with his fingers.

"Nah, just takin' a quick break. Remind me to have a talk with Professor Snape when we get to the castle, will ya?"

"What's got your panties in a twist this time?" Sandy asked, smiling innocently when Aster glared at him.

"I think that some fourth year Slytherins are harassin' the Lockwood girl."

"Did you see it happen?" Tammy asked, glancing up from her book. Aster shook his head, and Jack shrugged.

"Then they're probably just teasing. We've always teased Hufflepuffs, you know that."

Aster rubbed his face with one hand. "It's drivin' me mad, 'cause I talked to the girl, and she says that it's nothing too serious. But when she came back from the very end of the train, where Randall and at least three other fourth-years are, her sleeve was singed, like someone had tried to set it on fire. That's not just teasin', mate."

Jack snorted. "Now hold on. I know that Randall and his group can be

a bit much at times, but even _they're _not stupid enough to attack a Prefect."

Aster fixed Jack with a long look, and then relaxed ever so slightly.
"Yeah, that's gotta be it. Listen mate, I've got to go finish patrolling, but in case I don't get back in time, save me a seat in the Great Hall?"

"Sure thing. Be sure to terrorize some first-years for me."

Aster rolled his eyes, and left the compartment. Sandy frowned at Tammy, who was setting down her book thoughtfully.

"I always knew that the Lockwood wasn't very liked in Slytherin, but I assumed that it was because she was a Hufflepuff. I didn't know people were actually targeting her. Though now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure I know the reason."

"Why?" Sandy asked, and Jack turned to focus on her answer.

"Well, I know for a fact that Randall and the rest are terrible at Herbology. Professor Sprout has always favored Lockwood in that sense. I remember talking to a few third years last year, and apparently Lockwood's started training to replace Professor Sprout as the Herbology Professor. Sprout gave her the third year classes to teach last year, and the Slytherins just _hated_ the fact that a Hufflepuff like Lockwood was teaching them. They didn't put in much effort, and then were so surprised when Lockwood gave them bad marks."

"Do you think that Randall and the rest are still bitter about it?" Sandy asked, and Tammy shrugged.

"I wouldn't be surprised. I don't know Randall well, but a friend of mine dated him and said that he was definitely the type to hold grudges."

Jack frowned, and propped his feet up on the seat opposite him. "I still think that Aster's overreacting. Randall's a Slytherin; we should be looking out for him, not trying to throw him under the bus."

Tammy gave him a look, but didn't say anything, picking up her book and burying her nose in it once more. Sandy shrugged noncommittally, and left the compartment to track down the candy cart.

Jack leaned back, staring at the ceiling for a moment or two before closing his eyes. He would never admit it to anyone, not even Aster, but Jack spent the rest of the trip trying to get the Lockwood girl out of his head.

He couldn't deny that she was pretty. Well, pretty for a _Hufflepuff_, anyway. No one that Jack would even _consider _making a move on. Hell, he'd kiss Aster in front of the entire Great Hall before even _thinking_ of pursuing that Lockwood girl.

She was ditzy and obsessed with plants, but her smile wasn't all that terrible. It was, dare Jack say it, _pleasant_. Her eyes were green, the color of oak leaves with sunlight shining through them.

How had Jack never noticed that she had green eyes?

* * *

><p>Merida's eyes snapped open, and she sat up, disoriented and gasping for air.</p>

She had just awoken from the most awful dream. In the dream, she was flying to Hogwarts, and suddenly these evil creatures pulled her from her broom. They had Elinor's face, and screamed that they were bringing her back to reality. They dragged her down to where her fiancÃ©e was waiting. But instead of a MacGuffin, her husband-to-be was Jack Overland.

_ "It's for the good of your family, Merida dearest," Jack hissed, his piercing blue eyes cold as ice. Merida screamed when he plunged a decorated dagger, the kind used in marital ceremonies, into her heartâ€"

"Miss DunBroch?" a familiar voice asked, and Merida looked up from her hands to see Madam Pomfrey standing there. Wait, Madam Pomfrey? Merida frowned, looking around at the clean, spacious Hospital Wing. How on earth did she get to the Hospital Wing of all places?

Merida was sitting up in a cot, her Firebolt leaning against her bedpost and her robes still in place. When the girl reached into her pocket, she found her trunk, still the size of a chalkboard eraser. She pulled it out, setting it on the bedside table.

"Madam Pomfrey, why am I here?"

"You fell asleep on your broom, my dear. Youâ€|" she paused. "You managed to land without sustaining any injury. You were very lucky, Miss DunBroch."

Merida looked outside, and saw that the sky was dark. Adrenaline jolted through her, chasing away any remaining traces of her nightmare.

"The Sortin'!"

Pomfrey smiled soothingly, patting the girl's shoulder. "Calm yourself, child, you haven't missed the Sorting. The first years aren't scheduled to arrive for at least twenty minutes. You still have time."

Merida let out a relieved laugh, and ran her hands through her hair. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, stretching her back out with a series of popping sounds as her joints cracked. Her stomach was grumbling with hunger, and so Merida hurried to get up.

"Can I go? I feel fine, just really hungry!"

Pomfrey nodded, and tapped Merida's trunk and Firebolt with her wand. The two items disappeared. "I've sent your belongings up to your room, so you're free to go join the rest of the school. Be sure to get some rest tonight, Miss DunBroch. Sleep deprivation is a no laughing matter."

"Aye, I will! Thanks, Madam Pomfrey!" Merida said, and ran out of the Hospital Wing. She was still a little tired, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. The Scottish girl ran to the end of the hall, turning left and entering another hallway. Five minutes of navigating later, she was in the Entrance Hall. She listened, and heard the sounds of hundreds of people just beyond the large double doors.

Cringing, Merida eased the door to the Great Hall open, slipping inside. Thankfully, the first years hadn't arrived early, though the majority of the school was already seated. Merida flashed a smile at those who turned to stare at her, and hurried to the Gryffindor table. Agnus had saved a seat for Merida, bless her, and Merida gave her best friend a hug once she sat down.

Agnus was a tall, sturdy girl with long black hair, dark brown eyes and bone-pale skin. She was the Mother of Gryffindor Tower, or at least that's what everyone knew her as, because she was fiercely protective of everyone in Gryffindor House. Her Prefect badge glittered on her chest, and Merida admired it before returning her attention to her friend's words.

"Where were you, Mer?" Agnus asked, and Merida shook her head at her friend's concerned frown.

"It was nothin' serious, Aggie. I was just takin' a nap in the Hospital Wing, seein' as I didn't get much sleep last night," Merida explained, and Agnus rubbed her back, smiling kindly. Merida had missed Agnus so much over the summer. Agnus and Merida had been friends ever since their second year, when they both joined the Gryffindor Quidditch Team — Merida as Beater and Agnus as Keeper.

"How was yer summer, Aggie?" she asked, and Agnus pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Good, I guess. My parents and me just stayed home, worked on the farm, the usual. It was nice, though, to just relax. How was yours?"

Merida shrugged. "I dunno, it was great bein' back home, but my mum can be a bit difficult to handle."

A bit_ is an understatement, _Merida said to herself.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Agnus asked, and Merida shook her head.

"Nah, thanks though. I just need some time _away_ from all that, then I'll be right as rain!"

"If you say so," Agnus said mildly, folding her hands together in her lap. A seventh-year girl smiled across the table at Merida and Agnus.

"You ready for the new season?" Becca Orlando, also a Gryffindor Beater, asked, her blue eyes shining.

Merida laughed. "Y'better believe I am! D'you know when we're holdin' tryouts? We lost Fergie, so we're gonna need a new Seeker."

Becca nodded. "Yeah, I talked to Max about it, and he says that he needs to check with McGonagall to reserve the field. I assume he'll talk to us about it when we meet tomorrow after classes."

"We're meetin' at five, right?"

Agnus piped up. "Yep, five o'clock in the locker room."

Becca and Merida both nodded, and Merida was about to ask about Becca's summer when the large double doors opened dramatically. Merida and Agnus grinned at each other, and craned their heads to get a good look at the incoming first years.

"I swear, they get smaller every year," Becca muttered under her breath, and Merida had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from snickering. Agnus sent Becca a stern look, and the girl grudgingly quieted.

Merida smiled at the first years as they passed, remembering her own Sorting five years ago. She had been nervous, yes, but she was also a DunBroch. It wasn't in her nature to let people know that she was afraid.

Professor McGonagall turned to face the first years, holding a scroll and gesturing to the Sorting Hat. As she spoke, Merida looked up at the staff table, seeing all of her professors sitting there calmly, sipping their drinks and watching the first years carefully. Well, almost all of them were there; Hagrid was missing. Huh, Merida wondered where the giant groundskeeper was. Had he not brought the first-years across the lake, this year? Either way, Hagrid had never missed a Sorting as far as Merida knew.

Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, rose to his feet, and all muttering and voices were silenced in an instant. Dumbledore had that sort of effect on people; when he spoke, there was no choice but to listen.

"Welcome, welcome, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There are many rules and regulations that I could potentially bore you with, but this year I have decided to give them to you in written form. When you retire to your rooms, you will find a small booklet on your pillow. This contains all of this school's policies, and while you will not be tested on them, it would be wise to take a peek at it in the near future."

Dumbledore smiled around at the tables of students, his gaze finally lingering on the fidgeting first-years.

"Now, on to the Sorting!" he said cheerfully, and gracefully seated himself.

Merida and the rest of the Hall focused on the Sorting Hat, which was twitching in the way it always did before singing. The first years looked nervous, and Merida smirked at their expressions of horror. If they were scared of a talking hat, they were in for a treat when they went up the Grand Staircase!

With a flourish, the Hat opened its mouth wide, and began to sing.

4. Calm Before The Storm

Hey guys!

So sorry for the long update, camp's been pretty busy and I haven't had any time to write! I actually had this chapter written and completed about three days ago, but I wasn't able to post it until now (today's my day off).

I hope you guys enjoy this chapter, and I'm excited to get the ball rolling in terms of the Big Four interacting! Ooooh next chapter's gonna be a doozy!

Thanks for all the support, and if you like it and want more ASAP...

**PLEASE REVIEW!**

* * *

><p>Chapter 3: Calm Before The Storm</p>

* * *

><p>Hiccup trudged slowly across the large lawn that separated the castle from Hagrid's hut, so exhausted that crawling was beginning to seem like a favorable way of travel. He walked alone; Toothless had decided to sleep in Hagrid's hut that night, curled up next to his closest animal companion, Fang. The sky was dark, littered with thousands upon thousands of stars, and the teenager mumbled the constellations he knew under his breath.</p>

"Thor's Hammer, Idun's Tree, the Nornsâ€|wait, or is that Odin's Eye?" Hiccup asked himself, and nearly tripped, a result of not watching where he was going. The boy yelped, and barely managed to throw out his hands to catch himself. The grass was sickly warm and wet with nighttime dew. Hiccup grimaced, pushing himself up and wiping his hands on his pants.

"Ugh, I don't need any other warm liquids on me tonight, thank you very much," he declared to no one in particular. And it was true; when he and Hagrid had gone to the hippogriff corral situated deep in the Forbidden Forest, they found Marigold in the first stages of labor. Hagrid had referred Hiccup to a variety of excellent books on hippogriff care, but none of them had gone into much detail on what to expect when a pregnant hippogriff begins the birthing process.

Hiccup had half a mind to owl the authors and fill them in, because he had gone into Marigold's situation with absolutely no idea of what to do despite having scoured every inch of their books.

To put it simply, a hippogriff going into labor is a pretty even combination of starving, bloody, furious and just plain vicious.

Hiccup couldn't even begin to count the amount of times he had been forced to run back to Hagrid's cabin to get more towels and haunches

of raw meat. Hagrid had done most of the care for the first part, as his skin was tougher and he was overall a bigger person, less likely to get cleaved in two by Marigold's talons. According to the hippogriff books, it was important to keep Marigold fed, as all of her energy was going to the laying. The feeding was a bit difficult though, as Marigold was equal parts grateful and angry that someone were getting close enough to give her meat.

Hiccup was able to get a little more hands on when Marigold's labor progressed, and her aggression all but disappeared. She seemed more anxious and desperate than anything, and finally allowed Hagrid and Hiccup close enough to examine her.

A careful pat had confirmed Hiccup's earlier question: Marigold was definitely having twins, which would explain her nervousness and irritability. Hippogriffs usually only had one egg, as laying two was extremely taxing on the mother and the chicks themselves. Hagrid left to go get her some water, and advised that Hiccup should try to have her lay down, and keep her as calm as possible. A gentle tug on the lead was all the hippogriff needed; she collapsed on her side and let out a pained trill.

Marigold's eyes were bright red, like large rubies, and her black feathers were speckled with metallic gray. Hiccup spent at least thirty minutes staring into those eyes, blinking as little as possible and stroking the female hippogriff's feathers in a way he hoped was soothing. It seemed to work, because her agitation lessened, and she leaned her head into Hiccup's hands.

Hiccup had been helping Hagrid with Hogwarts' magical creatures for three years now, and he had worked with Marigold for two of those years. She was the alpha female of the herd, and so gaining her trust had been especially tricky. Hiccup still had scars on his arms where she had nipped at him with her sharp beak. It had taken months of daily cajoling for Marigold to accept food from him, and another few months for her to allow him to stroke and groom her. It was a frustrating process, but more than worth it in the end.

Whenever someone thought to ask Hiccup what he wanted to do with his life and received the answer, they always seemed so surprised.

_Magizoology? Why would you want to do _that _of all things?

-

Hiccup never really knew what to tell them. The reason came to him in the moments where he was with a magical creature, staring it in the eye and helping it overcome adversary or simply observing it. In that brief point in time, everything became clear to him. He had grown up with magic, and so wand-magic and wizard or witch-related magic was commonplace. But magical creatures were truly magical. They were creatures of fiction and fantasy to Muggles, but Hiccup was able to touch them and see them and know them.

Being able to work with these amazing beasts made Hiccup feel truly special, more than any flying broomstick or fancy spell ever could.

Marigold's laying went through the Feast, but Hiccup wouldn't trade the experience for all of the food in the world. It was rare for

hippogriffs to trust humans (or half-giants, in Hagrid's case) enough to lay in their presence, and to know that _he _was one of those humansâ€œ|it made up for the hunger gnawing at his stomach.

Hiccup was surprised that he was still hungry after the night's events. The amount of fluid and blood that had been present should have chased away his appetite. But Hiccup supposed that after years of working with a variety of magical creatures, nothing could really gross him out enough to make him forget about food.

The tired wizard reached the lakeside entrance to the castle, and heaved open the doors. The castle was still lit with torches, but it was quiet and empty, Hiccup's footsteps echoing eerily as he made his way to the Grand Staircase.

The stairs were drifting lazily from place to place, and to someone not familiar with them, they would appear to be moving randomly. But Hiccup wasn't a stranger to Hogwarts. He wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point in his first year, the pattern of the Grand Staircase just _clicked _for him. He had always been good at solving puzzles and putting things together, and the staircase was just that â€œ a puzzle.

Hiccup yawned loudly, stepping on the first set of stairs and letting it carry him to the next floor. He made his way upward, his mind reminding him at the last second to take an extra large step near the top â€œ he didn't fancy getting his foot and upper leg stuck in the vanishing step. The next staircase would take him back to the bottom floor if he stepped on right away, and so a minute or so was spent waiting for it to travel back up. The Ravenclaw Tower wasn't far; five minutes later he arrived at the large door with the raven shaped knocker.

Hiccup lifted his hand up and lightly tapped on the door. The knocker came to life, fluttering its silver wings and stretching. Hiccup sighed, wishing that it would hurry up and ask its question already. Classes started tomorrow, and he would have to get up early to get his schedule from Professor Flitwick.

"Hiccup?" a female voice asked sharply from behind him, and Hiccup was too tired to jump in fright, instead turning his head to see Pascal Thompson striding toward him, her dark green eyebrows furrowed. The Ravenclaw Head Girl was a no-nonsense sort of girl, a trait that was a blessing and a curse. Hiccup had forgotten to get a note from Hagrid â€œ there was no way to talk his way out of being out past curfew.

"Uh, hey Pascal, fancy seeing you here. Nice night out for a walk, isn't it?" Hiccup asked nervously, glancing back at the raven. It was still flapping its wings and cawing softly, and Hiccup wanted to bang his head into the nearby wall. The raven was prone to being a bit slow at times, but this was getting ridiculous. It was as if the world wanted Hiccup to get in as much trouble as possible.

"You weren't at the Feast, you're covered in dirt, and you look dead on your feet. Spit it out, Haddock."

Hiccup cringed. "I was out with Hagrid. One of the hippogriffs was having twins, so I couldn't come back in time for the Feast. Sorryâ€œ|" he said, not expecting her to let him get away with it.

Students were required to be at the Sorting Feast unless given explicit permission by a Professor or the Headmaster, and Hiccup hadn't gotten a note.

To his immense surprise, Pascal smiled. The seventh-year girl walked forward and pressed her Head Girl badge against the yawning raven. It immediately froze into its original position, and the door swung open. Hiccup's jaw dropped, and he stared into her dark eyes — she was only a few inches shorter than he was.

"Um..."

"The raven would have never asked you a question. It has a locking system when it gets to a certain hour, and only Prefect and Head badges can overrule it. If you were anyone else, I would have assumed that you already knew that."

"But..."

"You're not in trouble, Hiccup. Contrary to what you may believe, you're a terrible liar, so I know that you're telling the truth. And I..." Pascal trailed off, and Hiccup caught sight of the guilty expression on her face. Hiccup's tiredness faded slightly as he realized why she was letting him off the hook so easily. The Head Girl patrol had ended at least an hour ago, and now that Hiccup took the time to observe her, he saw that Pascal's robes were mussed, her tie slightly askew.

Hiccup suspected that an overenthusiastic Gryffindor Head Boy was to blame, but merpeople would walk on land before he gave voice to his suspicions.

The two Ravenclaws walked into the Common Room, which was empty, thank the gods. Pascal nodded at him before retreating into the Girl's Dormitories, located on the eastern side of Ravenclaw Tower. Hiccup went up the stairs to the western side, and finally pushed open the door to his room. His roommates were asleep, and so Hiccup was careful to be quiet as he padded across the floor to his bed.

The wizard stripped out of his dirty robes and tossed them in the hamper beside his bed, pulling on his boxer shorts. He was too tired to look for his sleeping shirt, and so he simply climbed into bed and pulled the covers up over his shoulders.

Hiccup closed his eyes, and after what felt like seconds of sleep, he was waking up to the sounds of his roommates getting ready for the first day of classes.

* * *

><p>The morning of Tuesday, September 2nd was a busy one. Rapunzel entered the Entrance Hall with a smile on her face, her robes swishing around her ankles. Her hair was in its usual braid, and the end brushed against the small of her back as she walked. She had gone down to breakfast early, and now all she had to do was get her schedule.</p>

"Miss Lockwood!" Professor Sprout called, and Rapunzel smiled widely at her favorite professor, weaving through the large mass of bustling

students in order to meet the older witch. Rapunzel felt the bubbles of individuals' magic in the air, as she always did, and the feeling was so common that suppressing it was second nature.

Her first year at Hogwarts had been especially difficult. Rapunzel had grown up knowing about her condition, but had never had any reason to develop any means of controlling it. At home, with only her father and a few occasional guests, it wasn't overwhelming. But the second she entered the castle, she had been bombarded with so many magical signatures and marks that she had almost collapsed. Luckily, Professor McGonagall had been warned of her condition, and had summoned Professor Snape to assist.

Snape was a very proficient Legimens, and as such he was able to delve into Rapunzel's mind and create a mental block that temporarily suppressed Rapunzel's sensitivity. The remainder of the night was a strange but pleasant absent of magical signatures. It was so strange and yet so freeing, to be near other witches and wizards and not be attuned to every aspect of their magic.

The morning after her Sorting, Rapunzel was called to meet with the Headmaster himself. Professor Dumbledore kindly told her that fortunately, there was another magic-sensitive witch on the castle grounds. If Rapunzel wanted, she could receive private instruction on how best to control her condition. The magic-sensitive witch was none other than Professor Sprout.

Rapunzel smiled at her professor. "It's so nice to see you, Professor Sprout! How was your summer? Did the fungi experiment go well?" she asked. Before leaving for summer, Sprout had planned on doing extensive tests in order to gage the magical potential of a colorful fungus commonly known as rumskid.

"My summer was marvelous; the rumskid is going to be an excellent addition to the seventh-year curriculum! I'll give you the notes later today, I'm sure you'll find them to be very interesting! Now, Miss Lockwood, I have to hurry back to your other housemates, but I wanted to give this to you before you headed off to breakfast."

The stout woman handed Rapunzel a sheet of parchment. Rapunzel peered down at itâ€"

6**th**** Year Academic Schedule: Rapunzel Jane Lockwood**

[Tuesday, Thursday]

Herbology, 8:00am â€“ 10:00am

Potions, 11:00am â€“ 12:10pm

_Defense Against Dark Arts, _12:50pm â€“ 2:15pm

Independent Study, 3:00pm â€“ 5:00pm

The schedule was what she had been expecting; Rapunzel had submitted her preferred classes after receiving and reviewing her OWL scores. Herbology was an obvious choice for her, as was Potions â€“ both used and studied the different properties of plants. NEWT-level Defense Against the Dark Arts was a requirement to become a Hogwarts

professor, as the staff had to be prepared in case of a threat to the students. The independent study was Rapunzel's time to grade the work done by her first and second year classes, a specific time slot in her day that she was infinitely grateful for.

The bottom half of the parchment, however, was a surprise.

**Herbology Teaching Schedule
>Professor: Rapunzel Lockwood

[Monday, Wednesday, Friday]

_1__st__ Years_

Hufflepuff and Gryffindor: 11:00am â€“ 11:50pm

Ravenclaw and Slytherin: 12:50am â€“ 1:40pm

_2__nd__ Years_

Gryffindor and Ravenclaw: 8:00am â€“ 9:05am

Slytherin and Hufflepuff: 9:15am â€“ 10:20am

Rapunzel gasped, looking up from her paper into Sprout's wide, friendly face. "Professor, you really think I'm ready for first and second years?" she squealed, bouncing a little in excitement.

Rapunzel had expressed interest in becoming a Herbologist in her fourth year at Hogwarts. Her magic sensitivity allowed for such a different take on plants and their properties. Animals were much like humans in their magic signatures, so Rapunzel wasn't as interested in studying them. But plantsâ€|plants were _fascinating._

Plants were alive and yet completely different from anything Rapunzel had ever encountered. Their very pores sang with magic, but they were dominantly stationary. The magic within plants was easy to identify, but there were so many slight variations and hybrids, Rapunzel just couldn't get enough! As a young child, she had never thought to branch out to include plants in her magical senses. One of the first things Sprout showed Rapunzel was the magic within plants, and ever since then Rapunzel had been hooked.

After talking with Sprout it became clear that what she really wanted to do was teach Herbology, to channel some of her passion into the incoming witches and wizards. After a year of training, Sprout gave her the third year classes to teach. Third years were a good starting point for incoming teachers, as they required a good amount of teaching, but were relatively knowledgeable in the ways of the greenhouse and care of the plants.

The most difficult years were first and second years, as they were still very young and naÃ¯ve, and with them one had to start at the very basics. It required a great degree of patience and knowledge; being able to impart great amounts of knowledge to eleven and twelve-year-olds separated the adequate teachers from the truly brilliant.

Sprout smiled proudly, putting a hand on Rapunzel's shoulder. "I am, my dear. You did wonderfully with the third years last year, and the Headmaster and I both agree that you are more than ready to tackle the most difficult years. Once you're graduated, your apprenticeship will officially begin, and we'll start getting you ready to take over for good!"

"Oh, thank you thank you _thank you_!" Rapunzel cried, and threw her arms around her Head of House. The older woman chuckled at the girl's exuberance, and gave the younger witch a gentle squeeze before the two parted. With a final expression of gratitude, Rapunzel skipped into the Great Hall.

The hall was full of students sitting down to breakfast, and Rapunzel spotted the person she was looking for almost immediately. Her best friend Flynn Rider was sitting with his housemates at the Gryffindor table, laughing loudly at something being said. His white teeth gleamed as he smiled, and in that smile Rapunzel could see his resemblance to his cousin, Max.

Max and Flynn butted heads more often than not, and were sometimes downright violent with each other. But in the end, their friendship was stronger than anything. Rapunzel had been friends with both of them for as long as she could remember; they were like her family.

Rapunzel clutched her schedule in her hands and ran to the Gryffindor table, braid swinging behind her and a wide grin plastered on her face without any intention of disappearing. Just before reaching Flynn, a red-haired girl rose from the table to leave. Her back was to Rapunzel, and so neither of the girls had any warning before roughly bumping into each other.

"Oops, I'm so sorry!" Rapunzel squeaked, and immediately knelt to help the girl pick up her fallen book-bag.

Rapunzel looked up, and locked gazes with Merida DunBroch, the popular Scottish girl who played on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team with Flynn and Max. The Hufflepuff didn't know Merida particularly well, but Flynn always spoke highly of her, so Rapunzel made sure to smile.

"Don' worry 'bout it, twas my fault anyhow," Merida drawled, and shrugged before moving past Rapunzel and joining her friends as they walked to class.

Rapunzel's barrier prevented full sensation, but she could still feel Merida's magic, though it was a bit muted. Merida's magic was fierce and straightforward, and there was no hidden malice or cruelty. Rapunzel wasn't friends with Merida, so she wasn't as in tune with the girl's magic, but she had been around it enough to recognize it easily enough.

"Hey Punz, you okay?" Flynn's low voice came, and Rapunzel brightened immediately, a grin flying back onto her face. Flynn was standing beside her, his leather satchel over his shoulder. He said goodbye to his friends, who all smiled and greeted Rapunzel before returning to their breakfast. Rapunzel waved happily at them, and then walked with Flynn out of the Great Hall.

"So, what's got you like this? Did one of your plants make little babies, again?" Flynn teased, and Rapunzel scrunched her nose at him. He laughed, and threw an arm around her shoulder. "I'm just teasing!"

Rapunzel leaned into him, and then showed him the parchment, her eyes bright. "Look, Professor Sprout's decided that I'm ready to teach the first and second years!"

Flynn peered down at the paper, and his warm brown eyes widened. "Woah, Punz, that's amazing! Are you sure you can handle the little bastards, though?"

"Flynn!" was Rapunzel's reproachful response.

Flynn shrugged. "What? I'm being honest! First and second years are the worst! I mean, look at me, I was terrible at that age. It's a wonder you put up with me!"

Rapunzel shook her head. "I didn't put up with you. I just looked past some of the less pleasant things because I knew that you were a good person."

Flynn rolled his eyes at her. "And how did you know that, Oh-Mighty-One?"

"Your magic, of course!" Rapunzel replied cheerily, and Flynn's sarcastic smirk softened. His arm, still around her shoulder, tightened so that he could nudge her forehead against hers. Rapunzel smiled pleasantly, enjoying the closeness.

Describing individual magical signatures was nearly impossible, because no signature was quite the same. Even when two wizards cast the same spell, the feel of the spell was altered, because the magic forming the spell was completely different. Flynn's magic was as familiar as breathing, steady and warm, with sharp boyish undertones.

"You're too sweet for your own good, you know that?" he murmured, and Rapunzel laughed at his tone. They walked on in silence until they reached the double doors leading to the outside lawn.

"Alright, I've got Potions in ten minutes. You've gotâ€œ" Flynn peered down at the schedule still in his hands. "â€œHerbology. Hey, we've got Defense together at least! Want to meet for lunch?" he asked, handing Rapunzel the piece of parchment.

Rapunzel frowned thoughtfully, folding her schedule and tucking it into her robe pocket. "I'll try. I might ask Professor Sprout if we can have lunch together; I want to get her advice on how to structure the first and second year classes. I already have some ideas, but it wouldn't hurt to get her input."

"Alright," Flynn huffed before turning and heading back toward the Grand Staircase. Rapunzel waved, and he gave her a mock-salute before disappearing around the corner. The blonde giggled before opening the doors and slipping out into the morning.

* * *

><p>Merida hated Potions with a mighty passion. If her mother weren't so damn nosy, she would've never continued with it, content to accept the OWL score she had received earlier that year — an E, pretty darn impressive considering how much she despised the subject. But no, according to Merida's mother, 'a wife must be versed in all types of magic, especially those that are done within the household'.</p>

Merida would rather eat toad eyes than live a boring existence filled with days of cleaning and running a household, but in light of recent events it seemed that that was what Merida's future consisted of.

Elinor and Merida's frustration had come to a boiling point just yesterday, a few hours before Merida was set to leave for Hogwarts. No matter how she pleaded, no matter how loudly she yelled and tried to explain—Merida's words fell on empty ears. After what felt like days of arguing, her mother finally put her foot down. She threatened to write to Professor McGonagall and take Merida off the Quidditch team for good if Merida continued to fight her on her upcoming marriage.

At that, Merida nearly burst into tears; her mother had never threatened Quidditch before, and for her to do so now put a bitter weight in the girl's heart.

Because now, she had no choice but to go through with what her mother wanted. She couldn't lose Quidditch, not while she still had two years left to play. If Merida gave up those two years just to spite her mother, she would regret it for the rest of her miserable married life. She could scoff at and rant about her mother's demands all she wanted, but in the end—she was a wild cat locked up in a cage, the key tight in her mother's hand.

The Scottish heiress sighed in her seat, too softly for any of her neighbors to hear. The smell of the Potions classroom was sharp and herbal, but Merida was so used to ignoring it that she hardly spared it a thought. She watched as the remaining sixth year students trickled in, and looked around at the number of students. Including herself there were only fifteen, which was half the number she was used to seeing in the Potions classroom. Out of those fifteen, only two were Gryffindors.

Her fellow Quidditch player Flynn Rider swaggered into the classroom, and upon seeing Merida he immediately made his way to the empty seat beside her. Flynn was of the good sort; a bit cocky and selfish, but wicked loyal when it came down to it. He was a Chaser on the Gryffindor team, and for all of their differences off the field, he and Max were the most harmonious set of Chasers Merida had ever seen. They didn't even have to talk most of the time, passing and tossing the Quaffle to each other with seemingly no effort. The other Chaser, a fifth year named Loras Green, held his own, but it was Max and Flynn that really set the stage for scoring points in a match.

Merida looked around again, noticing that there weren't as many Slytherins as she had been expecting. There were nine Ravenclaws and four Slytherin's

White hair stood out against the sea of darker colors, and Merida's

hackles rose.

Jack Overland.

The one person in Hogwarts that made Merida's temper light up faster than a firecracker. The slimy, stupid Slytherin whose existence consisted solely of flirting and causing trouble. He was a Beater on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and never missed an opportunity to mock and berate her. Jack's blue eyes – cold blue, not like the sky Merida loved so much – were lazily drifting across the classroom, and Merida hurriedly turned around before he could meet her eye. She'd roll over dead before giving him the satisfaction of knowing that his presence in the classroom bothered her.

"Take out your textbooks, and let us begin," Professor Snape's oily voice simpered from the front of the classroom, and Merida grimaced at the sound. She hadn't realized until that moment how blissful her life had been without Snape hovering over her shoulder, waiting for her to fail. He always had it out for Gryffindors, which explained why only two Gryffindors remained in the NEWT-level course.

There was a rumor that Snape was so bitter toward Gryffindors because a Gryffindor had gone off and married the girl Snape had pined over for his whole life. Most people didn't believe it, Merida included. Snape, the slimiest git in the entire wizarding world besides Jack Overland – in love? There was no way it was true.

Agnus claimed that she personally knew the woman in question, that she was a beautiful woman by the name of Lily Potter. The husband, James Potter, had been a fantastic Quidditch player in his time at Hogwarts, and wasn't all that bad looking, either. They had a ten-year-old son named Harry, and Agnus said that he was simply adorable. But then again, Agnus loved all children equally, so Merida wasn't quite sure if he was actually adorable or not.

Merida didn't think Mrs. Potter was the woman in the story, though. Hell, she didn't believe in the story at all! Snape wasn't capable of such a thing; he was a man of bitterness and spite, not of love.

Flynn leaned over to whisper to Merida the moment they were given their task for the day; brew a Confounding Draught, but make it without using billywig wings. It was a reasonably difficult task; billywigs were the key ingredient in a Confounding Draught. Snape probably thought that it was an easy starting point, but it would take an entire lesson to complete, and most likely hours outside of class.

"Hey, I thought you were done with Potions. Why the sudden change of heart?" Flynn asked casually, his eyes following her as she reached for her mortar and pestle.

Merida stared down at her cutting board, and shrugged. "I dunno, just felt like challengin' m'self, I suppose. Why'd you continue? Have you finally decided to admit that yer in love with Snape?" she mocked, a desperate attempt to change the subject. She liked Flynn well enough, and he was a great teammate, but that didn't mean she wanted to spill all of her family troubles to him. She hadn't told anyone about her troubles back home, not even Agnus. She loved Agnus with all of her heart, but she knew that if she told, Agnus would try to

mother and pity her.

If there was anything Merida truly, _truly_ hated, it was being pitied.

Flynn punched her in the shoulder, hard, and Merida cackled softly to herself. He grumbled some curses under his breath, and the two of them went to work on their potions. The conversation soon turned to Quidditch, and Merida was so absorbed in discussing that year's competition that she almost forgot to add the roasted elgroad stalks. Snape, who was walking behind her at the time, sneered down at her as she hurriedly tossed them in.

"Distracted, are we? Well, I know the perfect remedy for that. Miss DunBroch, you will be switching places with Miss Peasley. These arrangements will be permanent," Snape declared smugly, and Merida sent him a nasty glare before roughly shoving her things in her bag. Flynn groaned at the loss of his only Gryffindor companion, and Merida lugged her cauldron and supplies to the very front table where Ingrid Peasley — a dark-haired Slytherin girl with a sour expression on her face — had been sitting moments before. A Ravenclaw boy was sharing her table, and although his sharp, narrow face was familiar, his name was a mystery to her.

He was a skinny thing, but tall, with wiry arms. He was determinately not looking at her, and so she couldn't see his expression. His light brown hair was shaggy, nearly long enough to touch his shoulders, lending him a very boyish look.

Merida didn't know him well, but she _did_ know that he kept to himself, and liked to help Hagrid take care of the magical creatures that inhabited the forest. She had a feeling that she knew him from something else, but the specifics escaped her, much to Merida's frustration.

She continued her potion, but kept stealing glances, and frowned at the way he angled his face away from her. Did he think she had some sort of disease or something?

"Do I have somethin' on m'face or somethin'?" Merida hissed, and the boy's gaze flickered in her direction before focusing on his work once more. His eyes were green, but they were gone too quickly for Merida to take note of the shade of green.

"No," he replied, his voice more nasally than she had been expecting, nasally with a hint of huskiness. It was the sort of voice that made everything sound sarcastic, and Merida's brow furrowed as a result. She stirred her potion for a moment longer, glowering.

"Then why're you tryin' so hard to avoid lookin' at me?"

"The only thing I'm _trying_ _to do_ is finish my assignment for the day, and I can't even do that," the boy muttered under his breath, but Merida heard him anyway. The Scottish girl flared, and the boy sent her another quick look. There were bags under his eyes, and he let out a groan, rubbing his face with his hands.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I had a really late night, and I just want this day to be over. It's nothing against you," he said plaintively, turning back to his potion.

Merida blinked, astounded. She had been revving up for a fight, and in three short sentences, the Ravenclaw diffused the entire situation. It took her off guard, and the rest of the lesson was spent in silence. She was so deep in thought that even Jack's stupid antics didn't bother her as much as they usually did.

The Gryffindor managed to finish most of her potion, and used a quick spell to stabilize her draught. The spell would suspend the potion until Merida could come back to work on it. Her partner was finished with his potion, and had it bottled and given to Snape before Merida could begin cleaning up her station. The class was dismissed, and it wasn't until Merida stood to leave that she noticed the Ravenclaw boy's absence. In the span of a minute, he had packed his things and left the classroom.

She still couldn't remember his name.

* * *

><p>It was late, and Jack needed to find something to do.</p>

Sure, he had a practically naked girl perched on his lap, kissing him like it was her last day on Earth, but even that had lost some of its appeal. Sure, Ingrid Peasley was hot, but she was more boring than a Flobberworm when it came to conversation. Jack enjoyed the feeling of her warm, curvy body atop his, but other than thatâ€¢she was just someone to fill the space.

Ingrid hadn't been difficult to seduce; after a summer lacking in female contact, Jack had been desperate for someone to kiss and hold, and she was the type to put out without a moment's hesitation. He usually aimed higher, but Ingrid had been willing, and Jack was too on edge to be bothered to work harder than he needed to.

Without much enthusiasm, Jack began to kiss her neck, and almost grimaced at the needy whine that resulted from the action. On any other day, he would have been proud that he had such an effect on a girl, but todayâ€¢well, today was one of those days, Jack supposed.

"Oh, Jack," Ingrid sighed, and Jack let out a sigh of his own, only his sigh was one of frustration rather than of pleasure. A few minutes more, and he had had enough. Ingrid frowned when Jack sat up, forcing her to sit on his thighs rather than straddle his waist. Ingrid was clad only in underwear, her breasts pressed snugly against Jack's bare chest â€¢ Jack still had his pants on, his collared shirt open. The two were seated on Ingrid's bed, the curtains drawn and a silencing spell cast to prevent others from hearing. A quick glance at his watch told him that it was nearly ten o'clock, and Jack latched onto that fact.

"It's almost curfew," he said, trying to make his voice sound regretful. Ingrid hummed, and leaned in to kiss him, her tongue attempting to coax his into motion. Jack bore her ministrations, but was firm when she pulled away.

"I really should go," Jack urged, and Ingrid giggled.

"When did you become such a goody-goody? I always knew that Aster was

a bad influenceâ€|" she murmured, and Jack's hackles rose. It didn't help that he was in a bad mood, but insulting Aster was taking it too far. He moved off of the bed, and Ingrid fell back on the covers.

"See you around, Ingrid."

Ingrid shrugged, and moved to grab a magazine from her bedside table. "I don't know what's got your panties in a twist, Jack. I was just trying to help you relax, and you go all monk on me. But whatever, I'll see you around," she said casually, and started reading her gossip, a clear dismissal. Jack smiled despite himself, and quickly pulled on his robes before leaving the room.

The Slytherin Common Room was almost empty, only one person occupying the spot by the fire. Jack's shoulders relaxed, and his smile became more genuine.

"Hey, mate," Aster greeted without looking up from the parchment in his hands. Jack muttered something in response, throwing himself into one of the black armchairs opposite Aster. The fire was roaring on his left, and Jack turned his face toward it, closing his eyes and basking in the warmth.

"How was Ingrid?" Aster asked, and Jack huffed, letting his head drop back so it was resting on the back of the armchair.

"I left before we did anything serious. I justâ€|wasn't feeling it tonight. I don't know what's wrong with me," Jack muttered to the fire, and Aster looked up from his work, green eyes thoughtful.

"Maybe the sleepin' around is finally catchin' up to you. Sex is great, mate, but you know as well as I do that when you don't give two stones 'bout the girl you're with, it wears at ya."

"Helpful as always, Aster. Maybe if _you _got laid more often, you'd be less of a downer," Jack suggested.

If anyone went on about Jack's personal business in that way that Aster did, it would be beyond irritating. But Aster was unique in that sense; he wasn't of the usual sort. He was Jack's best friend through and through, the friend he laughed with and talked about serious things with. But Aster was also Jack's guardian, his brother, his fatherâ€|whatever Jack needed at the time.

Aster didn't respond to Jack's jab, and he didn't need to. They both knew that Aster was right, but Jack was too proud to admit it. Aster went back to his work, and Jack stared into the fire, his friend's words rolling around in his head.

Jack had started being sexually active about a year ago. The feeling was intoxicating, and once Jack started he couldn't seem to stop. The knowledge that with a few words and the right moves, a girl could be writhing under him and begging for moreâ€|it was quite a rush. It made him curious, and curiosity led to more experimentation.

But no matter how many times he did the deed, that spark was never there. Jack had had fantastic sex, but he had yet to experience that indescribable feeling Aster talked about. Jack was a bit put out at

first, but quickly got over it, not seeing the point in lamenting. He knew that he was attractive, that he was an attentive lover; after a while, the emotional connection didn't seem important.

The physical closeness was enough.

Jack was staring into the fire when the wood suddenly sparked, and with those sparks an idea came into his head. The boy smiled, a slow smile, because he had just found his new form of entertainment.

What better way to combat boredom than setting an epic prank?

Jack felt better already.

5. Catalyst

Heh heh...hello!

I'm sorry for the long update - camp's still going strong, so I've hardly had any time to write, and when I DO have time I tend to want to sleep/eat myself into a coma.

I hope you guys like this chapter, a lot of stuff happens!

It's like...the turning point in terms of character interaction. The Big Four...finally together at last! Though, to be fair, no one is very happy with the whole idea...

If you like it and want more as soon as possible, or have any questions/concerns...

**PLEASE REVIEW! **

* * *

><p>Chapter 4: Catalyst</p>

* * *

><p>Jack spent all night planning for his first prank of the school year. He already had the supplies â€“ he had snuck some Muggle fireworks into his trunk, and had a few magical ones lying around somewhere. He knew his prank's location: the western courtyard, up the hill from the greenhouses. Students were there all the time, and so Jack was sure to have a large audience.</p>

The fireworks wouldn't do any harm, but they would make an indecent amount of noise, and would probably scare the living daylights out of unsuspecting passerby. Jack would be nearby of course, to witness the reactions, and his lips quirked into a smile at the thought.

He woke up early the next morning, before anyone else would be awake, and hurried to put his fireworks into place. The morning was still dark, stars littering the very edges of the horizon. Jack hummed to himself as he waved his wand, sending the fireworks into the deep crevices of the fountain in the center of the courtyard. The place was empty now, but in a few hours it would be full of students going to class.

The Muggle fireworks were a bit stiff, like they were dried out or something, but Jack didn't see anything wrong with them, so he continued as planned. His white hair gleamed silver in the light of the approaching dawn, and Jack glanced at the lightening sky before turning to finish placing the last firework. The fountain looked untouched, his fireworks safely stowed away, invisible to the world. Jack pointed his wand at the fountain, and murmured a quick spell that would trigger the fireworks in three and a half hours; nine-thirty in the morning was a prime time, as Herbology students would be coming to and from the greenhouses and others would be studying in the large space of the courtyard. Jack didn't have a class at that time, and so he was free to sit and watch to his heart's content.

He could hardly wait.

Jack returned to his bed and slept for the remaining hour or so until his fellow sixth years began to wake up. Aster rolled out of bed, his hair mussed and his eyes nearly shut. Jack watched him with a fond smile; the Australian wizard was practically a zombie in the mornings. He regained the ability to speak in full sentences and open his eyes after he had showered and dressed. Jack was usually like that too, but that morning was an exception.

Jack waited impatiently for Aster to finish getting ready, already packed for the day. Aster raised an eyebrow at his friend, who merely shrugged.

"I guess last night was what I needed after all," Jack admitted, and Aster's suspicion abated somewhat. It wasn't a lie, after all. Aster just assumed that Jack was talking about his interaction with Ingrid, and Jack was more than happy to let him think that.

"Whatever ya say, mate," Aster said, and Jack flashed him a cocky grin. Aster rolled his eyes, and the two Slytherins made their way to the Great Hall. Breakfast was just starting when they arrived, and Aster quickly attacked the eggs and bacon. For all of his seriousness and maturity, Aster was a monster when it came to food. It was a wonder that he wasn't three hundred pounds by now.

Jack picked at his food, his excitement twisting his stomach into knots. He ate whenever Aster looked at him, to give the appearance of normality. The Great Hall was loud, the air thick with conversation and the heat of hundreds of bodies. Jack took a sip of iced orange juice, which helped, but only a little.

His body temperature ran a bit colder than most people, according to Madam Pomfrey. She theorized, after some tests, that it was because of the triggering of magic on the night his parents died. It had been snowing that night, and Jack's young mind thought only of being warm in the cold. So the magic had done that, to some degree. It wasn't harmful or detrimental in a serious way; it only meant that Jack had a higher chance of getting overheated. The normal room was often too warm for him, and Jack didn't even want to _think_ about summer.

Jack hated summer. It was too hot and dry, and when Jack stepped outdoors he felt like he was being wrung out like a poor, Jack-shaped sponge. His skin dried up, flaking and burning and peeling. The sun was relentless, like a persistent mosquito.

No, winter was the only season Jack truly enjoyed. He loved the cold; he loved the wintery sharpness to the air. Snow was a delight, and would remain no matter how many years passed. His snowballs were a sort of commodity at Hogwarts, and in snowball fights he was a sought after teammate. Jack felt light and free in winter, able to go outside in just a long-sleeved shirt and jeans and be perfectly comfortable, able to dive into the icy waters of the lake â€“ before they froze over for good â€“ and feel only a slight chill.

Jack sighed, relishing the thought, and was jerked out of his daydream by Aster getting up to leave. Jack hurried to follow his best friend, and he and Aster headed to their first class: Defense Against the Dark Arts. Jack enjoyed Defense, but would never admit that dueling made him a bit queasy. For as long as he could remember, the concept of intentionally hurting another human being was utterly repulsive to him. Jack had suppressed the feeling for years, and was able to duel without difficulty. In fact, he was rather good at finding peoples' weak spots and exploiting them. But no matter how much he smirked and laughed, there was always this dark spot in his chest, this tinge of doubt and guilt.

It was annoying as hell, that's what it was!

Jack heaved a great sigh as he and Aster approached the large oaken door leading into their Defense class. Their classmates were bustling about, hurrying inside, and with a firm shake of his head Jack followed his best friend into the classroom.

* * *

><p>Merida walked out of her History of Magic class that morning with a splitting headache. She leaned against the wall of the corridor, rubbing her temples and praying for the ache to go away. She had Quidditch later that afternoon; she couldn't afford to have a headache.</p>

The Scottish witch pushed off the wall, forcing a pleasant expression on her face and marching down the hall with her chin up and her shoulders pushed back. The headache still raged, but she pointedly ignored it. She'd get rid of it through sheer force of will if she had to! She was a DunBroch; mere headaches weren't enough to put her out of commission.

The cool fall morning was nice against her skin, and she breathed in deep, staring up at the overcast sky. It was probably going to rain soon, which only made Merida smile more. Quidditch in the rain was exciting, and she loved the feeling of rain pelting her as she sped through the air. Merida smiled at the dark clouds racing toward Hogwarts, and began her trek toward the greenhouses.

She glanced at her watch, and saw that it read 9:27 AM. She had eight minutes to make it down to class, plenty of time. Merida grimaced as the headache gave her a painful twinge, and focused on the courtyard that was coming closer and closer. Merida had always loved the Herbology courtyard; it reminded her of the courtyard back home, the one she had spent hours upon hours in as a child.

There was a large group of second years gathered around, as well as a group of older students. Merida entered the courtyard, and saw that

blonde girl from yesterday, the one who had run into Merida at breakfast. She was staring at the fountain in the center of the yard with a strange expression on her face, but the Hufflepuff was known to be a bit strange, so Merida didn't pay it much mind. What did catch her attention was a tall, skinny boy with shaggy brown hair. It was the Ravenclaw from her Potions class!

He was writing notes at a rapid pace, his long nose buried deep into his notebook. Merida frowned, her headache forgotten in the face of this mystery. Why was he so familiar? Merida would be willing to bet a ridiculous amount of money that she had interacted with him more than once before, and yet his identity continued to elude her.

Merida was about to go and interrogate him when the Hufflepuff girl shrieked.

"Everybody get out of here!" the blonde yelled, and just as she yelled the fountain began to smoke and sizzle. Merida stared at it, and all at once felt the building pressure of magic. Without warning the top of the fountain flew off, sending large arrows of fire and boiling water all around the courtyard. That's when the screaming started, and in seconds the courtyard became a madhouse. Merida saw the fire heading toward a running third year, and sent a quick shield charm. The fire bounced off harmlessly, and she was only given a moment's peace before the ground shook, a quake so powerful it sent her stumbling to the ground. Her knees bashed against the rough cobblestone, and she hissed as she beheld the bloody scrapes there.

Breathing hard, Merida pushed her hair out of her face and looked up. The blonde Hufflepuff was still standing before the fountain, like an idiot. Cursing, Merida scrambled to her feet and ran to stand next to her.

"What the hell's goin' on? Why's the fountain doin' this?"

"There're fireworks in there, but not just wizarding ones. Muggle ones, too, and it's causing the wizarding ones to malfunction. I don't know what to do; the magic's building upâ€|"

Merida and the girl both ducked down as another flare of fire spat out of the ruined top of the statue. The crowd that was still running all fell as another quake ensued, and Merida wondered if any of the professors had been alerted yet.

The girl was so small and delicate, and Merida was surprised at the firmness in her voice as they stood up again.

"We're going to have to set them off completely."

"Are ya outta your mind? If we set those things offâ€"" Merida began angrily, but the girl gave her a hopeless look.

"If we let it build up, it's only going to get worse! We need to do it now; we can't afford to wait another second! Please, Merida!"

The girl knew Merida's name, and Merida felt the oddest stab of shame. But the shame was washed away when more fire appeared, and the two witches braced themselves.

"What d'ya suggest, princess?" Merida said through gritted teeth, and the blonde Hufflepuff pointed her wand at the fountain. Merida mimicked her, and managed to keep her ground when the earth shook again.

"On the count of three, sent a stun. The stunning spell is meant to immobilize, so hopefully it contains some of the blast. One, twoâ€œ"

"Three!" the two girls yelled at the same time, and sent their spells. The red light hit the fountain, and there was a moment in which nothing happened. But then, suddenly, the blonde turned to yell to her, but it was too late. The fountain exploded in an earsplitting eruption of sound, and the blonde girl screamed, suddenly out of Merida's sight. The heat and fire was everywhere, and Merida choked out a scream as something pushed against her body, sending her flying out of the way of the blast. She curled up against a stone pillar, her ears ringing and her chin throbbing from where it had collided with the ground.

The world was hot and painful, but then, in a moment, it was all over. Merida didn't try to get up, her heartbeat hammering in her chest. Her hearing was muffled, as if everything was a dream but she couldn't wake up. Time was meaningless; she couldn't tell if minutes or hours had passed.

Eventually, she felt hands touching her shoulders, and a voice. When she looked up she saw Professor McGonagall peering down at her, and Merida tried to speak, but she couldn't hear her own voice.

McGonagall, with surprising tenderness, helped the girl into a sitting position. Merida leaned against the pillar, her head lolling uselessly. She gazed around at the utterly destroyed courtyard, and something heavy settled into her chest at the sight of the blonde Hufflepuff crouched next to a prone form.

When the Hufflepuff moved aside for a second, she saw that it was the boy with shaggy brown hair. The Ravenclaw's face was covered in small scratches, and when the blonde witch moved aside even more Merida saw a large, bloody burn extending from his bicep to his wrist. The red-haired girl must have made a sound of regret, because McGonagall's hand was gentle but firm on her shoulder.

And thenâ€œ|Merida saw him.

Jack Overland was standing next to the blonde Hufflepuff, an unreadable expression on his face. Merida had never felt as much hatred for Jack as she did just then. The Slytherin didn't even seem surprised; he didn't even look remorseful, and Merida knew in that moment that he was the one who had set the fireworks.

It was clear from the acceptance in his icy blue gaze, a gaze that was currently locked with Merida's own.

* * *

><p>Rapunzel stood silently beside Merida DunBroch, with Jackson Overland on her other side. They were all covered in soot and

scratches â€“ they had yet to visit the Hospital Wing, as their injuries weren't severe enough to require immediate attention.<p>

The Hufflepuff's lips were pressed together, hands tightly clenched at her sides. Anger, anger like she had never felt before, welled up inside of her. Her magic must have been acting up, because Merida and Jack were careful to keep their distances.

The skin of her arms, legs and face was marred with painful scratches, but somehow those were the only marks she could find. She had been blown back by the blast, or so she assumed, avoiding most of the fire and flying rock.

But she didn't care about any of that. All she could think about were the screams of students â€“ her students â€“ as they ran from the courtyard, some with painful burns and some unscratched but still terrified. Rapunzel had shielded as many as she could, but some still sustained injuries. Standing in the smoking wreckage of a once beautiful courtyardâ€|it had been a moment of immense anger and bitter sorrow. Rapunzel cried, but not for her wounds, not even for Hiccup Haddock, the boy who had sustained the most serious injuries. No, Rapunzel cried out of anger for the threat made to her students, she cried for the innocent second years that had no idea how to protect themselves properly. The feel of Jack's magic was so strong around the place that for several seconds all Rapunzel could do was breathe it in.

Jack's magic was sharp and icy, and more expressive than Rapunzel would have expected from him. A frozen pond in the middle of winter, empty and dusted with snow; that's the image that came to her mind when she felt his magic. She had felt it before, but never for very long, and they were never in the same space long enough for Rapunzel to really feel it.

Rapunzel knew the moment the fountain exploded that Jack was the one who had set the fireworks. His magic was all over the place, but for some reasonâ€|she didn't speak up. It was only when Professor Sprout arrived that Jack was labeled as the perpetrator.

She wasn't sure why she didn't identify Jack, and that added to her frustration.

Brought back to the present, Rapunzel allowed herself one glance at Jack. Her anger spiked at the almost bored expression on his face. She was too angry to even attempt to read his magic, but she didn't even need to. His expression said it all; he was just waiting for it all to blow over, he didn't even register how dangerous his "prank" had been.

Rapunzel forced herself to look away, and her fingernails dug into her palms so hard that it stung.

Professor Dumbledore sat in his desk, and Rapunzel stared into his bright blue eyes, clinging to the serenity found in them.

"After hearing all of your accounts, I now must decide upon the best form of punishment. Yes, Miss DunBroch, I do intend on punishing all three of you."

"But sir, Lockwood and Iâ€"" Merida attempted to explain, but Dumbledore held up a long-fingered hand, effectively silencing the Scottish witch.

"You both destroyed a fountain that was gifted by the Founders themselves, a precious monument that has graced these grounds for countless generations. Your intentions were noble, but if you had waited just a minute longer, a professor would have been there to completely disable the fireworks. Miss Lockwood miscalculated the time it would take for the magic to erupt, most unfortunately for the two of you and for Mr. Haddock."

Rapunzel's anger abated slightly, and shame washed over her. Her eyes filled with tears of guilt, and she bowed her head. Jack shifted slightly beside her, but Rapunzel didn't even bother looking over. She was too overwhelmed by her own lapse in judgment, her own rashness. Jack was to blame, yes, but so was she. Rapunzel had also had a hand in endangering the lives of her students, in hurting Hiccup, and that hurt more than anything.

"The fountain and its courtyard will be repaired, but it will take time. There was a great deal of complex magic involved in the making of the courtyard, and I would say that the earliest it will be completed would be December. I believe that it is only fitting that you are punished until its completion. Miss Lockwood, Miss DunBroch, and Mr. Overlandâ€|you three will dedicate one hour per day to assisting Hagrid with the upkeep of our grounds. This hour will take place immediately after the last class hour, from three o'clock to four o'clock. I'm afraid that this will cut into your independent study, Miss Lockwood."

"It's fine, Professor," Rapunzel whispered, managing to keep her voice from cracking. Her vision was blurry with tears, but she managed to keep them at bay.

Rapunzel would just have to work faster to get all of her grading done, that was all. She was so guilty that she was almost glad to have punishment. She could have killed innocent studentsâ€|

"Wait, that's _it_? Overland _sets_ the bloody fireworks, and yet he gets off that easily?" Merida shrieked, her cheeks flushing with the heat of her anger. Dumbledore didn't have to say a word; his solemn stare was enough to remind Merida of her blatant rudeness. She ducked her head. "I'm sorry, Professor. I shouldnt've said that."

"It's quite all right, Miss DunBroch. I can see your frustration, but know that I have my reasons," he explained gently, and Merida bobbed her head, still staring pointedly at the ground. Rapunzel sighed, and Dumbledore fixed his calm gaze on her once more.

"Unless there are any questions, Miss Lockwood and Miss DunBrochâ€|you may go to the Hospital Wing. Your punishment will start tomorrow; you will be meeting at Hagrid's hut. I will inform him of your coming."

Merida's sky-blue eyes narrowed at Jack, and with a small scowl she turned and left the office, her long hair whipping behind her head in a fan of fiery ringlets. Rapunzel glanced at Jack, and as she turned saw the slight tightening of his jaw. It was so subtle that she might have been imagining it, though, and so she dismissed it just as

quickly. Her anger was still present, though turned inward as well as outward, and so she brushed past him without a word. His eyes flashed down to her face for the briefest moment, and she was struck by how blue they were. And they were like ice, so cold and deep and sad"

But she was passing him, and so she was forced to look away as she exited the office.

It was only when she reached the staircase at the very end of the hall that she allowed the tears to fall.

* * *

><p>Hiccup awoke to the furry face of Toothless, and the kneazle crooned loudly, the rumble making the entire bed vibrate. Wait, a bed? When had Hiccup been put in a bed? But that would meanâ€œoh.</p>

He was in the Hospital Wing.

Hiccup sat up with the aid of Toothless, and looked around at the empty room. It was late in the day, that was clear by the lack of sunshine streaming in through the windows. Instead, a dusky golden glow was shining in â€“ it had to be sunset. The Ravenclaw heaved a sigh of relief when he saw the lack of a red-haired girl in any of the other beds. So he had managed to push her out of the way, after all.

Merida had been standing right in front of the fountain. At least Rapunzel had been somewhat to the side â€“ if she had wanted, she could leap to the side and avoid the blast. But Meridaâ€œshe had nowhere to run. Hiccup had sent a Pushing Hex without thinking; in order to preform the hex effectively, he had to get within five feet of her. That put him in the way of the explosionâ€œwhich would explain his aching body and the amount of bandaging around his left arm.

The sling was cumbersome, and Hiccup groaned at the thought of lugging his arm in that way for any amount of time. How was he supposed to lift feeding buckets, or properly brush the hippogriffs? Forget trying to herd the thestralsâ€œ

Hiccup scowled, and Toothless nudged his arm, hissing softly.

"It's alright, buddy. It's just a scratch, I'll be back to normal in no time," Hiccup assured him, scratching behind the kneazle's black ears to placate him. Toothless fixed him with his acid-green gaze, and Hiccup smiled comfortingly.

The kneazle glared at him for a moment longer before huffing, licking his fingers with his raspy tongue.

"Oh, so it's my fault, now? How was I supposed to know that the fountain would explode?"

Toothless jerked his head, nodding toward his wand â€“ it was lying on the bedside table â€“ and hissing again.

"Wait, you're mad that I saved Merida?"

A purr of assent.

Hiccup sighed. "I couldn't just sit back and watch it happen, Toothless."

Toothless gave him a sharp nip on his hand â€“ hard enough to hurt a little, but Hiccup knew that he was holding most of his strength back. The kneazle had been scared, but he was too proud to show it.

"Thanks, buddy. I'm glad you're here," Hiccup murmured, and Toothless crooned, curling up beside his friend. Hiccup smiled, and was about lie back down when Madam Pomfrey rushed in.

"Good you're awake. How do you feel, Mr. Haddock?"

Hiccup winced a bit as she prodded his arm. "A bit achy, but nothing bad. Can I go, now?"

"Once I heal your arm, you can. Miss Lockwood was able to stabilize your burn, so you won't scar. You were very lucky, young man."

"Hm," Hiccup hummed in agreement, remembering the petite blonde girl hovering over him before he passed out. He knew her, of course, but not well. Rapunzel was very popular, but Hiccup had never really had a chance to interact with her. He was always helping Hagrid and/or studying for his classes; he didn't have much time to socialize.

Hiccup had had a crush on Rapunzel for a short time in first year, but then, that summer, Astrid pushed him in a rain puddle and smirked at him for the first time. He had been smitten with the fierce blonde Viking ever since, his attraction to the gentle, cheerful Hufflepuff disappearing almost instantly.

Pomfrey poked his arm with her wand, and Hiccup yelped.

"Hey!"

"Oh hush," Pomfrey scolded, but the twinkle in her eye told Hiccup she was mostly teasing. Hiccup pursed his lips, determinately not looking at his arm â€“ he could feel and hear the sizzle as the skin healed itself. The sensation was more than a little odd, and Hiccup was glad to have Toothless as a distraction.

A few minutes later, Hiccup was walking out of the Hospital Wing, a few bandages on his face but otherwise completely healthy. Toothless prowled alongside him, keeping especially close â€“ his shoulder frequently brushing against Hiccup's legs.

"Well, I missed all of my classes," Hiccup grumbled, and Toothless made a guttural coughing sound. Hiccup scowled. "Yeah, yeah, laugh at me all you want. I'm not the one who has to cough up hairballs when you eat too much at meals."

Toothless coughed again, louder this time, and Hiccup gave up. The kneazle was impossible to beat, and Hiccup had ceased caring enough to actually get angry or offended. The two walked silently back to Ravenclaw Tower, and Hiccup was about to mount the stairs when

Hagrid's voice echoed in the narrow hall.

"Hiccup!"

"Hey Hagrid," Hiccup greeted, and had to throw out his arms for balance when Hagrid clapped him on the back — otherwise, the wall would have been had a nice meeting with Hiccup's still-healing face.

"I jus' wanted to check up on ya. I heard 'bout wha' happened— you okay, lad?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Just a few scratches," Hiccup said, gesturing to his bandages. Hagrid's eyes shone in the dim firelight, and Hiccup managed to keep his balance when Hagrid clapped his back again.

"Good! I knew y're tough!"

"You did?" Hiccup couldn't help but ask, and Hagrid chuckled.

"You may not look it, but yer stronger than you look. Under all this, a'course," he paused, gesturing vaguely to Hiccup.

"You just gestured to all of me," the Ravenclaw grumbled, and Hagrid smiled toothily, and continued as if he hadn't heard the boy's response.

"Oh, an' I wanted to let ya know, we're getting' some helpers for a few months. Dumbledore's orders."

"Huh. Did he tell you who?"

"Nah, he jus' said that they'd be helpin' out for an hour every day, starting at three. You'll show 'em the ropes?"

"Sure, no problem," Hiccup said, but behind his confident words his stomach was twisting itself into knots. He had a sneaking suspicion of who would be joining him and Hagrid, and the more he thought about it the more nervous he became.

He said goodnight to Hagrid, and quickly went to his room, crawling into his bed and staring up at the drapes overhead. He had a poster of the Hogwarts Crest on the bottom of the drapes, and the red, green, and yellow sections seemed especially bright and jarring. Hiccup turned onto his side, closing his eyes to escape them.

He finally managed to go to sleep, and thankfully he didn't dream.

6. Tension

I'm so sorry it's been so long since I last updated!

All I can say is that real life is a bitch, and I've been dealing with a lot of stuff lately. But I've been working on this chapter for a while, and I'm so glad it's finally finished!

As the title states...tensions run high in this chapter! The Big Four

have their first day of detention together, what could POSSIBLY go wrong?

If you like this chapter and want more ASAP...

**PLEASE REVIEW! **

* * *

><p>Chapter 6: Tension<p>

* * *

><p>Rapunzel was solemn all through lunch, and after forcing down some chicken she escaped the Great Hall. But she had gotten no farther than the doors when a pair of strong arms encircled her. Rapunzel recognized the person almost immediately, and buried herself into Max's embrace. He must have followed her out of the Hall.<p>

Rapunzel was touched by his obvious concern. His magic was strong and sturdy, full of gruff affection and support, and the moment Rapunzel sensed it her self-control shattered.

She let out a sob, and Max tugged her into a small hallway away from the crowds. He held her tightly to his chest, murmuring soothing sounds to her. He smelled comforting and familiar; the deodorant he used was sharp and distinct.

"Talk to me, sweetheart," Max murmured when Rapunzel had calmed down some. She sucked in a deep breath and pulled back slightly. Max kept his arms around her, and sank down so that they were sitting on the ground, the younger girl practically sitting in his lap. Rapunzel sniffled, wiping her face a bit before telling him all that had happened.

"It was all my fault, Max! I c-could've _killed_â€"" she finished, her tears returning as she remembered Dumbledore's words. But Max stopped her, his hazel-brown eyes soft but holding an edge.

"Stop, Rapunzel. This wasn't your fault, not in any way, shape or form. Do you understand that? You did what you thought was right; you did it to _protect _everyone. You aren't to blame, but I know who is, and I'm going to give him a piece of my mind."

"No, Max, don't!" Rapunzel grabbed his arm as he made to rise, and Max frowned. She took a deep breath. "I justâ€|I don't want you fighting my battles for me. I love you, and I really appreciate that you're angry with Jack for my sake, butâ€|I don't want you or Flynn to go after him. Please, Max?"

Max stared down at her for several seconds, and let out a hissing sigh. "Rapunzel, you know I can't say no when you give me that look. Fine, Flynn and I'll leave the bastard alone, but you _have_ to tell me if he gives you any trouble during those detentions. Promise me, sweetheart," Max demanded.

Rapunzel nodded, hugging him tightly. She always loved it when he called her sweetheart. It was an endearment he used only for her.

She wasn't quite sure why she was stopping Max from going after Jack Overland. To be honest, she was a bit frustrated at her inability to harbor violent feelings toward him. Then again, Rapunzel supposed that she had gone her entire life without truly hating anyone â€“ she was sorely out of practice. Not to mention that ever since Rapunzel had made eye contact with him in Dumbledore's office, she hadn't been able to shake the idea that perhaps Jack was sorry for what he had done.

But that was silly; it was Jack Overland. He was notorious for being whimsical and casual with everything, there was no way that he felt any serious degree of remorse. He was a trickster, through and through, and Rapunzel had no evidence to convince her otherwise.

Rapunzel and Max talked for a bit longer before they both had to make their way to class, and Rapunzel forced a smile on her face before leaving her friend. But underneath her false cheeriness was a nervous flutter of anxiety.

She had no idea what to expect from her first day of detention, and not knowing was more terrifying than anything.

* * *

><p>The last bell of the day rang loudly in Jack's ears, and he began packing his stuff without much enthusiasm. The entire day had been a bit of a disaster, and Jack wasn't sure whether he was dreading or looking forward to the detention. Maybe it was a bit of both.</p>

He was dreading the scorn, but at least he wouldn't be ignored. They would all be working closely together; they would have to interact at some time or another. Merida hated him, but at least she reacted to him. So far, the entire school was doing a good job of acting like he didn't exist, like his wrongdoings placed him so high up on the scale of bad that it was considered wrong to acknowledge him.

Aster wasn't speaking to him at all. Jack cringed at the memory of the lashing he had received after his meeting with Dumbledore. Aster was skilled at a variety of things, but Jack hadn't known how good he was at making people feel bad until last night. He somehow did it without yelling.

The Australian's rant left the white-haired wizard somehow feeling even worse than he had before. That was saying something.

Jack knew that he had screwed up. Dumbledore seemed to be the only person that understood that. When Merida and the Lockwood girl left the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore didn't rip Jack a new one, as the boy had been expecting. Instead, he smiled â€“ fucking smiled â€“ and offered Jack a lemon drop before informing him that his foster parents would be told of what had happened, as was school policy. Jack simply nodded, shocked at the lack of judgment in the older wizard's bright blue gaze.

"You are free to go, Mr. Overland," Dumbledore murmured gently, and Jack frowned, stunned. What, no long talk? No scolding, no guilt speeches? Was the Headmaster serious? –

_ "Sirâ€œ" Jack began, but stopped himself. On second thought, he didn't really want to know why Dumbledore was being so mild. It was probably for the best that he didn't know. With a polite bow, Jack turned to leave, but before he could do so, Dumbledore spoke. _

_ "I know what you are feeling, Mr. Overland. Guilt is one of the most painful emotions to live with, and unfortunately it takes a combination of time and patience to overcome it. But trust me, I speak from experience when I say that it will get easier. Do not give up hope." _

_ Jack didn't turn around, and after a few seconds turned the handle and left the office. _

The Slytherin shouldered his bag, and ignored the whispers and stares that followed him as he walked out of the classroom. He refused to let his feelings show on his face, and settled for his usual snarky smirk. It was a safety net, and at the moment Jack didn't care what sort of image he presented to the world. Let them think that he didn't care; fuck them and their assumptions.

He walked across the green lawn separating the castle and the oaf's hut, the sky a dim and gloomy gray. Perfect, Jack mused, scowling up at the sky and willing the rainclouds to disappear. Rain was so depressing. All it did was get people wet and create large, awful mud puddles. And in the fall, rain was usually warm, which was just plain annoying. Blech. No thanks.

Hagrid's hut was like one of those little houses Jack had seen in Muggle fairytale books; it had sturdy wooden walls and a straw-thatched roof. A thick stream of smoke steamed from the chimney, sharp and arid. He had never liked fire or the smell of fire, and his nose crinkled in distaste. He hoped that they didn't have to go inside â€“ with the fire burning that steadily, the inside of the hut was bound to be a million degrees and then some.

Jack reached the hut, and peeked inside one of the small windows. Hagrid wasn't inside, and so Jack plopped himself on a boulder situated beside the house. He could feel the distinct heaviness of rain collecting in the air, and smiled without much humor. Things couldn't get much worse.

"Wipe that smirk off yer face, Overland! It's yer fault we're in this bloody mess!" a familiar voice snapped, and Jack amended his previous statement.

Things could most definitely get worse.

Jack looked up to see DunBroch standing over him, her hair a messy, poofy mess of curls. He had heard her described as "sexy" and "hot" by some of his fellow sixth years, but he honestly couldn't see it. Not that he tried very hard, because it was DunBroch. She was always yelling and barreling through things without much thought; she was such a Gryffindor. She rose to the occasion faster than wildfire, which was entertaining as hell.

But romantically, or even sexually speaking? Oh please.

Jack kept the smirk on his face, more to annoy her than anything, and

didn't respond. She didn't need a response; she was set on being angry at him no matter what circumstances they were in, so what was the point?

DunBroch turned up her nose at him, and plopped herself down on the farthest boulder from the one Jack was seated on. He didn't mind, nor did he bother looking over to see what she was doing. Normally, he thrived on aggravating her, but it must have been the rain, as well as his rotten mood, because all he wanted to do was go back to his room and sleep.

His long fingers traced his wand; the silky smooth surface was usually a comfort to him. In that moment, it felt like cold, lifeless wood, even colder than his skin. He had set off the fireworks with it. He had hurt innocent children with it. Jack let his eyes close, clenching his hand around his wand so tightly that it hurt.

Never in his life had Jack wanted to take something back as much as he did his unfortunate prank. Now, he was invisible to the people he cared about most â€“ to be honest, there was only Aster, so saying people was stretching it a bit. The worst part was that people didn't think he gave a shit. They didn't even ask to see how he felt. Even Aster didn't give him a chance.

His best friend expected the worst in him.

Jack's jaw clenched, and he searched in vain for a distraction. DunBroch was muttering obscenities to herself, and Jack would eat dirt before willingly starting a civil conversation with her. The Lockwood girl was approaching, and the sadness in her face was enough to sober his thoughts even more. She looked like someone had just killed her kitten in front of her, and Jack snorted at her self-sacrificing determination.

Though to be fair, he shouldn't have expected much more from a Hufflepuff. They were a silly, stupid bunch. Full of goody-two-shoes and dullards who couldn't talk their way from point A to point B without asking for help. Jack shuddered at the thought of being Sorted into Hufflepuff. Thank God he had been spared that fate.

The Lockwood girl stopped in front of them, her long braid swinging behind her. She twisted her hands together, biting her bottom lip as she surveyed the obvious tension between Jack and DunBroch. Her green eyes were even greener in the gray murkiness that coated the lawn and forest. Jack shifted his position slightly, and her eyes flicked to his face.

He could see her trying to hate him. It was comical, how easy it was to read her. The emotions flew past her eyes: sadness, resentment, confusionâ€¦ finally settling on curiosity. Jack stiffened at her shameless observation of him, and sent her a suggestive leer. Two could play at that game.

Her cheeks flooded with color, and Rapunzel hastily averted her gaze, her hands twisting even more furiously. Jack smirked, leaning back and staring up at the sky. It was just too easy to get to some people.

"Um, hey," a nasally voice said from behind them, and all three turned to see a tall skinny Ravenclaw standing there, dressed in

practical jeans and a brown shirt. His face was sharp, like the rest of him, and Jack frowned. He knew the kid by sight; he was a sixth year just like the rest of them. He was one of the smart ones, always with his nose in a huge book.

DunBroch raised a brow, her expression skeptical. "What d'ya want?"

The Ravenclaw sighed, rubbing a dirty hand across his face. "Yeah, this is happening," he muttered to himself, before peeking at the three once more. "I'm Hiccup, the one who you'll be doing your hours with."

Hiccup? Such a weird name, but oddly enough it seemed to fit him. Jack simply looked at the boy, taking in his obvious discomfort. Hiccup wasn't looking at DunBroch, and this seemed to irk her. Served her right, the attention-loving idiot that she was. Never going two minutes without saying something loud and or annoying.

The Lockwood girl smiled gratefully at him. "Hi, Hiccup!" she exclaimed, her smile blinding when placed next to the other three's solemn, resigned expressions.

Hiccup nodded to her, and his brow furrowed. "Hi. It's Rapunzel, right?"

"Yep!"

Jack frowned. 'Rapunzel' was an even stranger name than Hiccup. How had he never heard of these two before? He knew them by sight, of course, but the idea that five years had gone by and they had never even been _introduced_...it made Jack curious, that was for sure.

Hiccup coughed, his entire body radiating uncertainty, and Jack very nearly put his head in his hands. This was hell. Literal _hell_. He was stuck with an insufferable loudmouth, a ditz, and an awkward nerd.

_Karma's a bitch, _a nasty voice (he liked to think of it as his conscience) said in the back of his head.

Jack couldn't agree more.

* * *

><p>Hiccup found a fair amount of amusement in the reactions of the other three sixth years at the sight of the Nifflers in their pens. Hagrid had assigned the detention group to feeding and cleaning the Nifflers, taking pity on them and giving them an "easy" job for their first day. Hiccup had a huge amount of respect for the half-giant, but even he had to admit that Hagrid's interpretation of "easy" and "difficult" was dangerously skewed. Hiccup had scars to prove it, too. He didn't hold it against Hagrid, though, and in any case it had quickened his learning progress by leaps and bounds.

Feeding Nifflers wasn't all that difficult, as long as you were careful to drop the food and run for your life â€“ the creatures tended to charge when they smelled their next meal â€“ but the

cleaning was a whole other story. They were furry, but when they got wet their bodies became as slippery as if they had been coated in oil. Hiccup wondered if Jack, Merida and Rapunzel knew this, or if their reactions were based on their previous experience with the creatures â€“ the easy, boring work that third years usually did.

Merida's outraged exclamation of, "You've got t'be _jokin_!" Nifflers? What're we, third years?" confirmed Hiccup's thoughts. Rapunzel was struggling to keep positive, smiling uncertainty at the pen of Nifflers. Jack was silent, as he had been since Hiccup arrived outside Hagrid's hut.

It seemed strange for the boy to be so quiet â€“ from what Hiccup had observed over the years, Jack was always laughing and joking around with his many friends. He had played against him in Quidditch more times than he could count, though Hiccup's position as Seeker and Jack's more involved Beater position didn't allow for much interaction beyond the occasional Bludger sent the former's way. Neither Merida nor Jack seemed to recognize him from Quidditch, and Hiccup didn't know how to feel about that. He had always been good at being invisible, but he didn't know _how_ _good_ until that moment. Hiccup swallowed hard, focusing on Merida's question.

"Hagrid wanted to give you something easy to start on your first day," he said blandly, trying so hard not to laugh. He couldn't wait until they got to the cleaning part of the job.

Couldn't. _Wait_.

* * *

><p>"Stop laughin'"! Merida shrieked in Hiccup's general direction, a direction she couldn't pinpoint exactly thanks to the slippery mass of Niffler in her arms. The creature was squeaking in discomfort and flailing its body helplessly. Merida could understand its frustration, but at the same time she wished it all sorts of pain for being so damn_ slippery_!

"I'm not laughing, I swear," Hiccup choked out, and the Hufflepuff girl laughed along with him, the now-clean Niffler slipping out of her hands and crawling over to join the others in the freshly washed pen. The blonde girl was panting from the effort, but smiling, and Hiccup was calmly washing his Niffler as if he did it every day. Merida and Jack, on the other hand, were forced to use more violent measures.

Hagrid had come by at some point, but Merida had been too busy wrestling a Niffler to the ground to really focus on what he said. By the time she had finished washing the damn creature â€“ getting more dirt on it in the process, but not giving a flying Snitch at that point â€“ Hagrid had disappeared.

"Mother fucking dammit, you little shit!" Jack hissed from somewhere to Merida's left, and she glanced over to see that the Niffler was crawling all over Jack's back, getting that gross oily substance all over his robes and exposed skin. The Slytherin was fairly spitting with anger, struggling to grab the Niffler but only managing to look like a troll with a fairy attached to his back.

Merida didn't even bother trying to hold back her laughter. She threw back her head and laughed, the Niffler in her arms peering its head around curiously at the sound. Jack Overland, usually so suave and infuriating, was covered in dirt and had an oily Niffler on his back. It was better than Christmas!

Thinking of Christmastime made Merida's smile disappear. Her mother's words came back in a rush, and suddenly all Merida wanted to do was sit down and hug herself. Her days as a free person were numbered. Soon, she'd be shackled, and by something stronger than chains_. Matrimony. _

It made her feel a little sick to her stomach.

Jack's gaze was cold, humiliation tinting his cheeks pink.

"Go fuck yourself, DunBroch. Shouldn't be hard for you, since it's the only way you get fucked to begin with!" he snapped, and Merida's entire body stiffened. It was along the lines of his usual taunts, but something about that particular one set her aflame with rage.

She dropped her Niffler in the dirt, and Jack did the same, and if Merida hadn't been so angry she would have noticed the relief in his gaze at her rising to his bait.

"I'd rather be a prude then wave my tiny, _tiny_ dick to whoever wants t'see it!"

"You must be thinking of a different dick, DunBroch, because I'm anything but tiny."

Merida heard the Hufflepuff â€“ Rapunzel â€“ gasp behind her. What the blonde didn't know was that Merida knew how to deal with Jack. She had been doing it for years, and his attempt to intimidate her sexually was a desperate move, even for him.

"Oh, then all of your conquests must be lyin'. All two hundred of them," Merida jeered, and the two of them glared at each other, a mere foot of space between them. Hiccup and Rapunzel were silent.

Merida was so angry that she didn't even think before continuing.

"I wonder, how many girls are linin' up to see your tiny dick after what y'did? How many girls will want to fuck Jack Overland, the oh-so-mighty trickster who doesn't care that he hurt at least at least two dozen people just so he could get his laugh?"

The Gryffindor smirked up at him, waiting for the retort, waiting for the telltale sneer that would continue their banter. At this point, she expected it. Jack was an asshole, but at least she knew where she stood. She had at least a margin of control of how the situation went.

Jack stared down at her, and for the first time Merida hesitated in her stance. For the first time, she wondered if she had gone too far. But she quickly shook it off. Jack Overland practically _invented _the term "taking it too far".

She stared up at him, her smirk leaving her face but her scrutiny never ceasing. There was something stirring beneath his stoic expression, something that made Merida shift uncomfortably. Jack sucked in a deep breath, and Merida found that she couldn't move. A sharp tingle was piercing her skin, making her shiver uncontrollably. But a few more seconds of looking into Jack's eyes — they were so blue that they were almost glowing — and it all faded into a sleepy warmth. Merida blinked, slowly, her eyes remaining closed despite her attempts to open them. How much time had passed?

Rapunzel's voice pierced the odd emptiness that filled Merida's ears.

"Jack, look what you're doing!"

Merida frowned, or at least tried to. Her body wasn't listening to her; it was like she was falling asleep; everything was soft and floaty. A blindingly hot hand touched her arm, and Merida shuddered. She felt warmth suffusing through her entire form, and suddenly she could feel again.

She blinked back to awareness, looking at her hands. They were tinged with blue, the unnatural color fading rapidly. What the bloody hell had Jack done to her? It wasn't a spell, if it was it was a nonverbal one. But he hadn't been holding his wand—was it wandless magic, then?

Merida looked up, only to see Jack already half way across the field, heading back to the castle.

Hiccup scooped up the remaining Nifflers, the ease in which he did so made Merida scowl.

"I think we're done for the day," he said quietly, and Rapunzel nodded, sending Merida a quick look before moving to help Hiccup. Merida supposed she should help, but her mind was so consumed by what had just happened that all she could do was stand, shivering. She watched as Jack disappeared over the top of the hill.

It started to rain. It was a warm rain, but Merida still felt a deep chill.

End
file.